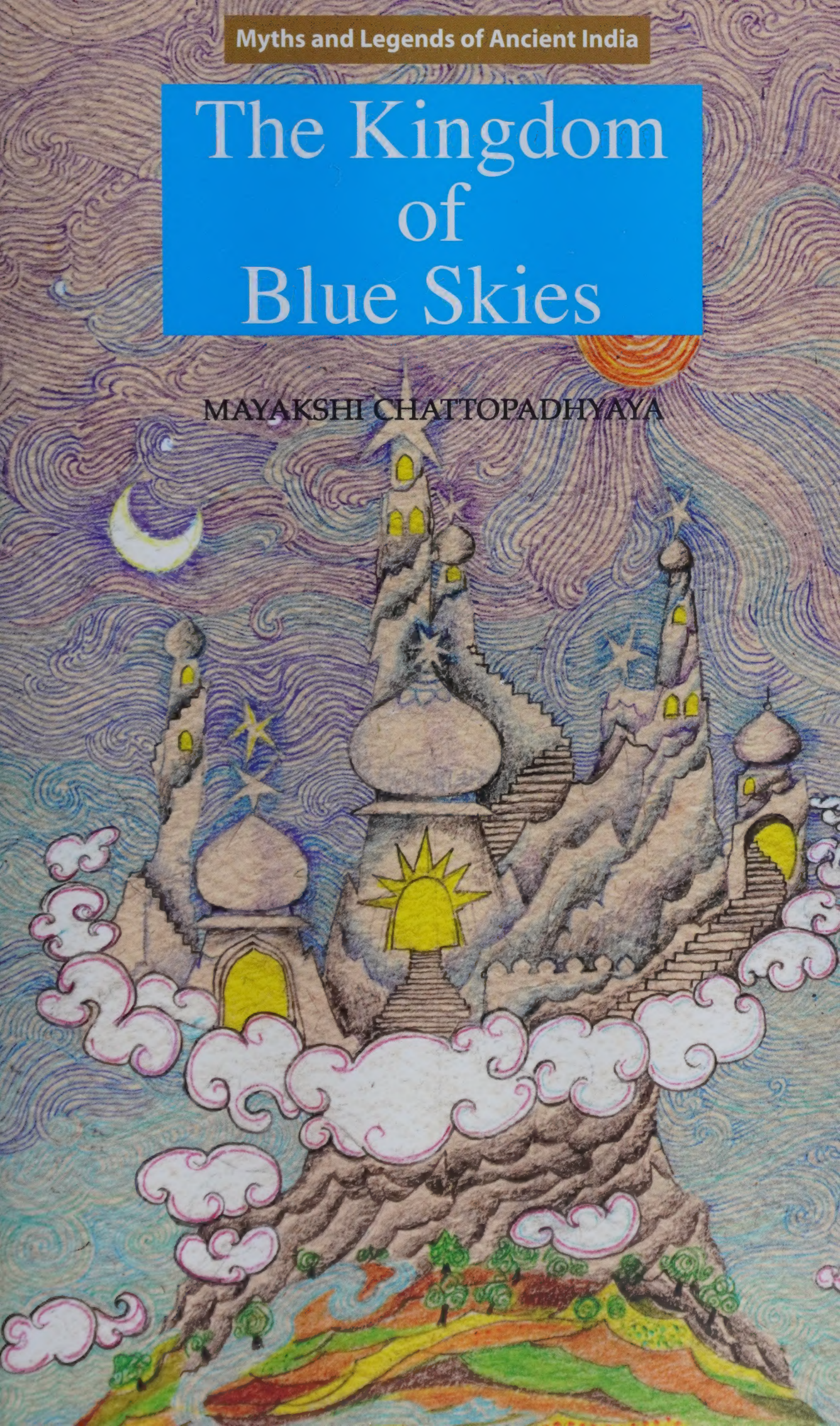
Myths and Legends of Ancient India

The Kingdom of Blue Skies

MAYAKSHI CHATTOPADHYAYA



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Folklore of India

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MAYAKSHI CHATTOPADHYAYA

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Author's Introduction

As a child, day after day, in the silence of sunset and evening star, I sat at my Grand Mother's feet, to listen to the wondrous tales she told me.

The stories spoke of the glory of Life, of the dance of Time and the rhythm of Nature. They spoke of Hope and Faith and Courage, so one could soar to great heights and dive deep into unknown depths, without fear of danger or death. For, no matter how dark the night, the morning light breaks through, the sun rises in golden glory, and a new day is born!

Through the growing years, I clung to these stories. Enchanted, I listened, as every moment throbbed with magical wonder. My heart soared higher and higher into new heavens of mysterious splendour and like the tiny lark, my thoughts took flight—up and up and up—to lands of delight, where "the love of the bee for the blossom burns bright"!

But, one sad day, my Grand Mother passed away into the world of no-return. With her, my fairy dreams faded, my secret hopes died and I was left alone to grapple with a world of harsh reality.

Time passed, life changed and I found myself in a far and foreign land, away from home and all that I loved and deeply desired. Lost and alone one wintry day, I looked out of my window, to stare at the bleak and icy scene outside-so like the frozen scene within me.

Each day, in blank despair, I sat by the window, not hoping for anything new or different. When one day, wonder of wonders, I saw a tiny, green shoot struggling

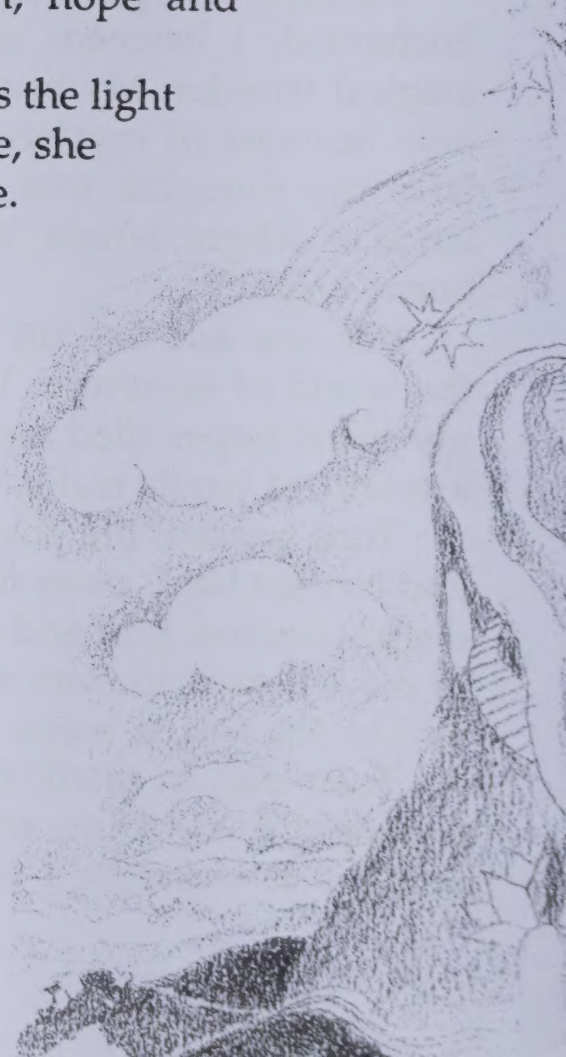
bravely to break through its icy shroud and emerge out of the darkness into light!

Like summer lightning, my Grand Mother's long-forgotten tales flashed back to brighten my heart and bring me the message of hope and courage! It was as though the years rolled back and time stood still and I was sitting at my Grand Mother's feet in the silence of evening, listening to the tales she told me!

As if in a dream, I sat by the window, to write these stories for all my little friends, with a hope in my heart that these dream-seeds will live and grow within them, and they will learn to enjoy the dream and also the Reality, which the secret of Life!

If you can open your heart to sense the deeper significance behind the outward simplicity of these stories, you will find that we are as young as time—as old as eternity and if we believe in the wonder and mystery of life, all things are possible—if only we have faith, hope and courage.

Amma, our Grand Mother was the light of our lives! Like golden sunshine, she brought life and joy into our home. Amma loved us and we loved Amma. Why? Mriga, the limpid-eyed deer, and Mayoor, the proud peacock with her gorgeous plumes, Kajal, the cunning monkey with the coal-black face, and Totha, the chattering parrot with the brilliant red beak, even they loved Amma dearly and would only be fed by her gentle, age-worn hands.



Amma was busy from dawn to dusk. The wheat had to be whisked and husked and ground into flour, the brass lamps to be polished and filled with sweet-scented sandalwood oil for evening prayers, and fresh and fragrant flowers to be gathered and woven into a garland for the golden image of our family God. But at the end of each day's journey, in the quiet hour of twilight, when day meets night, Amma spread her straw mat on to the soft green grass in the Jasmine Yard, to sit in silent prayer.

This was the magic moment when Roopu, her youngest grandchild, loved to creep on to her knee and tenderly folding her little brown arms around Amma's wrinkled neck, she whispered: "Please dear Amma, tell me one of the stories your Amma told you when you were a little girl!"

Amma smiled with a remembering twinkle in her far-gazing eyes, while Roopu waited wide-eyed, her legs crossed beneath her, her hands joined as though in prayer and her heart full of a far-off fairy feeling.

Thoughtfully, Amma opened the silver box in which she carried betel-leaf and tobacco. And as she dreamily chewed the leaf, her face grew still, her eyes deepened and in a soft and caressing voice she said:

"Now listen, my little one, to the story of "The Kingdom of Blue Skies".

MAYAKSHI CHATTOPADHYAYA

The Kingdom of Blue Skies

If you follow the secret path that swings and sways, to turn and twine and wheel and wind its way up the Blue Mountain, you will reach the Kingdom of Blue Skies. Where the mountain meets the far blue sky, passing pearl-clouds scatter drops of dancing rain. The air is cool and the earth glows green. Honey-blooms open their tender petals to the flitting, fluttering butterflies and call to the bright, blue bees. Tall trees sway in dream delight, to scatter love-seeds to birds that sing, on eager wing, to greet the everlasting spring.

A secret magic fills your heart, as you linger to listen to a far, far, cry, that echoes over the mountain and across the blue sky, "C-o-m-e— B-a-c-k—! C-o-o-o-m-e— B-a-c-k—! C-o-o-o-me- B-a-a-a-ck!"

Follow the far echo and it will lead you through tumbling towers and dreaming domes into the Palace of Blue Skies. But, why is the Palace of Blue Skies forsaken? Where is the King of the Kingdom of Blue Skies? And for whom does the wild wind weep?

A long, a very long time ago, when the mountain was young and the earth first blossomed into life, a strange, strong man came to the land of Blue Skies. On his forehead was a star, the sign of what he sought—the star of beauty! And when he found this beautiful land, he made it his own.

He captured the falling stars, to build himself a starry palace in the sky. He caught the sound of singing streams and gave it form, to create exquisite music. He stole the

colours of the rainbow and mixed them with light, to make life glorious and full of splendour. And so, he became the King of the Kingdom of Blue Skies.

So happy was his life, so full of beauty and splendour, that he longed to share it with someone he loved. So, one day, he rode on a pearl-black storm-cloud and flew with the wind over the Blue Mountain, across the Blue Sky and along the milky path of stars that leads to the moon.

As he reached the silvery edge of the moon, Chandrika, the Moon-Nymph, glimmered across the moon-lit sky. A moonflower shimmered in her hair and moonbeams twinkled in her eyes, as she scattered stardust along his path. The King was charmed by her mellow beauty, so he kissed her moonlit lips and hands and made her his bride. And together they flew towards amber skies and along the flaming path that leads to the sun.

At the golden gates of the Sun Lord's kingdom, stood Suryaki, the Sun-Nymph. A sunflower glittered in her hair and sunbeams danced in her eyes as she spread sunshine across their path. Enchanted by her dazzling beauty, the King kissed her sun-gold lips and hands and also made her his bride. And together, the three of them, flew back to the Kingdom of the Blue Skies.

The Kingdom of Blue Skies sparkled with splendour and the star of beauty on the King's forehead burned bright, as he lived happily with both his beautiful brides in the Palace of Blue Skies.

Later, when the shadow of the sun fell over the moon, twin boys were born to Chandrika. Bright stars of joy twinkled in her eyes and two little stars glittered on the infants' foreheads, as the King held them in his arms to dream of the day when they would grow up to conquer

new worlds of splendour and of beauty.

But Suryaki grieved and burned with envy, for now she feared that the King would give Chandrika and her two sons all his love and wealth.

Days went by and the infants grew into strong and handsome little boys. One day, they flew with the King on a rainbow cloud, to search for greater beauty and more joy.

That day, at last, Suryaki found herself alone with Chandrika in the Palace of Blue Skies. She ran into the garden, plucked a fragrant flower and filled its heart with a magic powder. Then, giving it to Chandrika, she said: "This fragrant flower is for you, dear Sister! Breathe in its wondrous fragrance and wear it in your hair".

But no sooner had Chandrika taken a breath of its magic fragrance, she was changed into a gorgeous green parrot and flew out of the palace, crying, "Te-tee—ee- T-e-e- T-e-e-e-e-e-e- Te-te-e-.e-e-e-"

When the King and the two little boys returned, they found Suryaki weeping. She wept and she wept, as she told the King that Chandrika had fallen over the mountain and was swept away by the swirling river. A sharp pain pierced the King's heart like a sword! The Kingdom of Blue Skies grew grey with gloom and passing pearl-clouds shed drops of trembling tears. Trees shed their leaves in sorrow and flowers closed their petals in pain!.

Meanwhile, the frightened parrot flew across the bright Blue Skies and over the Blue Mountain like a flash of emerald lightning. And when its wings grew weary and its breath grew weak, it fluttered down to a fruit-laden tree, in an immense palace garden. Faint with hunger, it pecked at a ripened fruit, but it fell to earth and two little Princesses who were playing beneath the tree, looked up and saw the emerald parrot on the tree. "Father! Father!" they cried, as they ran to the King. "An

emerald parrot, with ruby-eyes has flown into our garden. Such a beautiful bird we have never before seen!"

The King immediately sent for his best bird-catcher, and the frightened parrot was caught and imprisoned in a golden cage.

Time went sadly by for the King of the Kingdom of Blue Skies, for he had loved Chandrika deeply and missed her greatly. In sorrow, he turned to the twin boys and gave them all his love and care.

Once more, Suryaki burned with anger and set her heart on destroying the two little boys. She tore her garment spun of morning mist and golden sunshine and would neither eat nor speak. "Why do you grieve, my beautiful Queen?" asked the King one day, "Name your wish and it will be granted!"

"I wish", she replied, as sparks of fire flashed from her angry eyes, "to bathe in the blood of your sons!"

At the sound her cruel words, the King swooned with sorrow—for he lived only for beauty and joy. But Suryaki called for the King's attendant. "Take both the boys to a far-off forest. Kill them with this sword and bring back their blood in this golder jar!" she commanded.

At the dead of night, the two little boys were led away to a forest. Hand in hand, they walked through the silent night, when the sudden voice of the attendant roared like thunder in their ears. "Run! Run into the deep, dark forest", he cried, pushing them away.

Still as a stone the attendant stood, listening to the fading sound of frightened footsteps running in the dark. Then turning swiftly, he threw himself into a river and was washed away by the rushing waters.

But alas! the King of the Kingdom of Blue Skies had swooned into a slumber from which he never awoke! Suryaki burned within herself with grief and crumbled

into a heap of smouldering embers. Black clouds of mourning shrouded the Kingdom of Blue Skies and the empty palace echoed with the cries of the weeping wind.

The two little Princes, lost in the blinding darkness of the forest, took shelter under a tree. Drop by drop, the dew-drops mingled with their tears and forest-shadows closed around them like a velvet cloak.

As dawn was breaking, one Prince said to the other, "Brother! I am thirsty! Please fetch me some water!" But, just as the Prince reached the edge of a stream, a mighty black elephant rushed towards him, carrying a golden throne on its back!. Trumpetting aloud, it lifted the boy with his trunk and put him on the throne. Then like a storm, it raged through the trees and across the forest.

Now, this royal elephant belonged to a King, who had died without an heir. The people of his Kingdom let loose the elephant and decided that whosoever the elephant brought back on his back, would be crowned the King. Thus, the frightened little Prince became the King of an unknown Kingdom.

His thirsty brother, weary of waiting, fell asleep under the tree and a hermit passing by, picked him up and carried him to his humble hut.

Many days, months and years rolled by and both the Princes grew into young and strong men. One lived in a palace and the other in a hut, but each one prayed for the day when they would meet again.

One night, as forest shadows deepened, the moon grew pale and one by one the stars went to rest. The Prince in the forest hut lay awake, to listen to a pair of owls whispering in the dark. "Do you know, my dear, that the Princesses of Flowering Valleys wish to marry twin brothers, so that they will always be together?" said the he-owl to his wife.

"Yes I do!" replied the she-owl, "but I also know that they will only marry twin brothers who can bring them the gem that glitters on the King-Elephant's brow!"

"But nobody knows where the King-Elephant hides!" exclaimed her mate, "Not even I, who am the wisest of wise birds!"

"I do!" whispered the she-owl, getting closer to her mate. "On the edge of the end of the world, at the foot of a white mountain, flows a river of milk. There, amidst a thousand lotus blossoms, plays a little white elephant with a glittering gem in the centre of its forehead!".

The Prince could hardly believe his ears, so he awakened the hermit to tell him what the birds had whispered. The hermit smiled as he lay his hand on the boy's head and said, "Go in search of the King Elephant. You have my blesssings!"

On, and on, the boy wandered through the forest, not knowing where he was going or when he would reach the edge of the end of the world.

Just then, a Prince riding on a snow-white steed and wearing a silver armour, crossed his path. The two men stopped to stare at one another. The star of beauty burned bright on either forehead and they knew at once that they were brothers!

Overwhelmed with joy, they embraced each other and each one told the other the story of his life from the day they were parted in the forest. Then, the hermit Prince spoke about the Princesses of Flowering Valleys and what he had heard the two owls whisper, and together they rode through the endless forest, in search of the Elephant King.

As the night deepened, the moon rose above the clouds in silent splendour. The Princes, enchanted by her mellow beauty, followed her silver trail, which led them to the edge of the end of the world! And there, at the foot of a white mountain, flowed a river of milk, where a little white elephant, with a sparkling gem in the centre of its forehead, played amidst a thousand water-lilies.

When the little white elephant saw the two Princes with the star of beauty shining on their foreheads, he

stepped out of the milky waters, bowed his head to drop the jewel at their feet, and a ray of magic led them straight into the Palace of the King of Flowering Valleys.

Proudly, they bowed to the King and as they gave him the elephant-gem, an emerald parrot flapped its wings and shattered its golden cage!. With a whirl of wild green wings, it embraced the two Princes and wonder of wonders! The parrot was changed into a Queen. A moonflower shimmered in her hair and moonbeams twinkled in her eyes, as she told them about the Kingdom of Blue Skies and how she was changed into a parrot and why the two Princes were sent away into the forest.

Earth and sky glowed with joy, as the Princes of the Kingdom of Blue Skies were wedded to the Princesses of Flowering Valleys. Then, together, they set out to seek the Kingdom of Blue Skies. And, when they reach the secret path that swings and sways, to turn and twine and wheel and wind its way up the Blue Mountain, they will hear a far, far cry, echoing over the Mountain and across the Blue Sky!

C-o-me—B-a-c-k! C-o-o-o-me — B-a-a-ck! C-o-o-o-m-e — B-a-a-ck!

And now my story is done,
Red is the setting sun.
The silence of evening settles,
On flowers that close their petals.

Evening shadows are creeping,
Birds on their branches are sleeping.
Stars appear in the skies,
Like slowly opening eyes.

The moon from her place of hiding,
Over the night comes a-gliding.
Now that the night is deep.
Sleep, my little one, sleep.

Birth of a Lotus

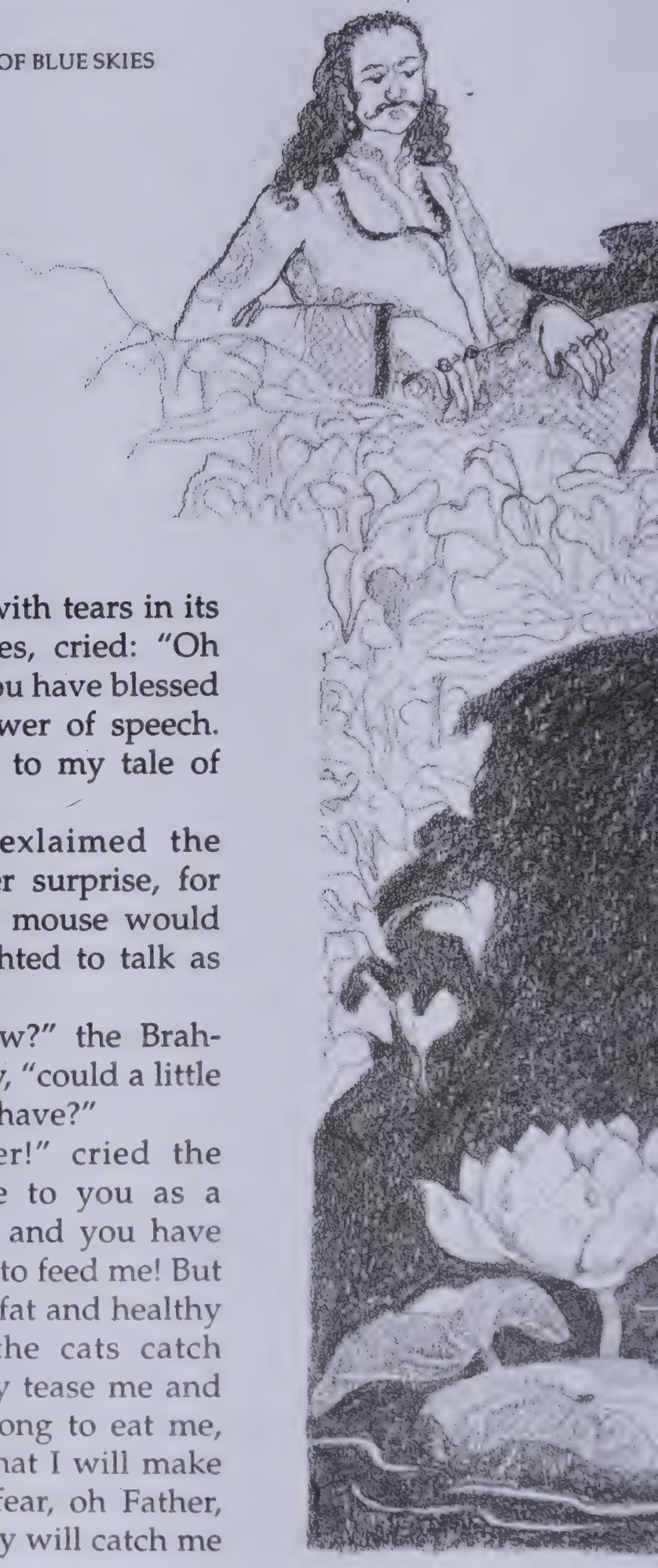
Down the mighty mountains, in and out of cliff and cavern, through dense forests and across fertile valleys, forever flows the holy river Ganga. Ever since its crystal waters began to flow down to earth, thousands and thousands of years ago, sages and pilgrims have come from far and from near to bathe in its pure waters to wash their sins away.

On the sun-swept banks of the river sat a poor, old Brahmin, with silver hair and long flowing beard. From sunrise to sunset, he would sit on the golden sand banks of the river, to ponder and to pray. And as evening shadow fell across the golden sand, he would return to his humble hut of palm leaves, by the edge of the river. The Brahmin had neither wife, nor child, nor earthly belongings and he lived on the offerings that passing pilgrims cast into his wooden bowl.

In a hole by the hermit's hut, there lived a tiny grey mouse. Each night, when the Brahmin returned to his humble hut, the mouse would come out of its hole to sit at the Brahmin's feet and to share his humble meal. Night after night, the mouse would come, and soon there grew an intimate friendship between the Brahmin and the mouse.

One day, out of love, the Brahmin blessed the mouse with the power of speech, so he could while away the lonely hours of the night, talking to his little friend.

That very night, when the Brahmin returned, the mouse came out of its hole, stood up on its tail, joined its



tiny paws and, with tears in its beady, black eyes, cried: "Oh Good Master!, You have blessed me with the power of speech. Pray listen now to my tale of sorrow!"

"Sorrow?" exlaimed the Brahmin in utter surprise, for he expected the mouse would have been delighted to talk as humans do.

"What sorrow?" the Brahmin asked gently, "could a little mouse possibly have?"

"Dear Father!" cried the mouse. "I came to you as a starving mouse, and you have starved yourself to feed me! But now that I am a fat and healthy mouse, when the cats catch sight of me, they tease me and chase me, and long to eat me, for they know that I will make a juicy meal. I fear, oh Father, that one day, they will catch me

and kill me! I beg you, Father, make me a cat, so I can live without fear for the rest of my life".

The kind-hearted Brahmin felt sorry for the little mouse. He sprinkled a few drops of holy water on its head and lo and behold! the little mouse was changed into a beautiful cat!

Overjoyed, the cat purred with pride, for it knew it was wiser and stronger than all the other cats in the village. All day long it prowled around the little hut, chasing and killing every mouse that came its way, without fear of danger or death.

For a while, the days went happily by until one night, the hermit returned to find the cat curled up in a corner, mewing in misery. "What is it, my little cat?" the Brahmin asked. "Are you not happy with your life as a cat?"

"Not at all!" cried the miserable cat.

"Why not?" asked the Brahmin, "Are you not wiser and stronger than the other cats? Why then my friend, are you unhappy as a cat?"

"Indeed, I am wiser and stronger than the other cats, but now, I have more fearful enemies—the dogs! The moment they set their eyes on me, they bark and snarl and gather into a pack to hound me. My heart throbs, my limbs grow limp, and, I am sure that one day they will catch me and kill me. Be merciful, oh good father!, and change me into a dog, so that I may hold my own against the other dogs in the village!"

So dearly did the Brahmin love the cat that he blessed it with holy water and changed it into a dog.

Wagging its tail, the happy dog jumped for joy. Fearless and free, he guarded his master's hut and as evening shadows veiled the sunset sky, he would wait outside the Brahmin's hut, to welcome him back home and share his meagre meal.

Not long after, one dark and stormy night, the Brahmin returned to his hut, but the faithful dog was not waiting outside his hut. Anxiously, he searched around the village

and along the deserted banks of the river, but nowhere was the dog to be found! Feeling forsaken and lost, he returned to his lonely hut, lit his oil lamp and can you imagine his surprise when, in the flickering light, he saw the dog crouched in the darkest corner of the hut, whining in misery. "Are you not well, my faithful friend?" said the Brahmin, caressing him tenderly. "Come!, sit by me and share my meal and tell me all your troubles."

"There is nothing wrong with a dog's life. But now my appetite is great and the crumbs from your humble meal barely satisfy my hunger. Oh Master", he implored, "if only I could be a monkey in the forest. I could then eat fresh fruit and juicy berries all day long and never suffer the bitter pangs of hunger". So sobbed the unhappy dog at the feet of the old Brahmin.

Closing his eyes, the Brahmin thought to himself: "I am a poor and old Brahmin, accustomed to hunger and to want. But, why should my little friend starve and suffer with me?" His gentle heart was filled with compassion and so, he chanted a prayer and in that magic moment, the dog was changed into what it wished to become—a monkey!

Wild with joy, the monkey sprang out of the hut and off to the forest he went. "Oh for the freedom and fullness of the forest!" he thought as he breathed deeply in the fresh and fruity air and swung by his tail from tree to tree, eating luscious fruit and juicy berries till he could eat no more. And then, as forest shadows deepened, he closed his eyes in blissful sleep.

But, summer came and the days grew hot. The trees began to shed their leaves and the streams went dry. The poor monkey's body burned with heat; his tongue was dry and his throat parched with thirst. Sadly, he looked down from the tree and saw a herd of water-buffaloes wallowing in a pool of cooling mud. "Oh how lucky they are!. How cool and comfortable they look, while I burn with heat and die of thirst", he thought.

No sooner did the sun set, he scampered back to the Brahmin's hut and waited eagerly outside the door. When the Brahmin returned, and saw the monkey, he smiled and said: "So at last, my friend, you have thought of your poor old friend. Come! sit with me and tell me all about your happy life in the forest as a monkey".

"I love the forest and the fresh fruits and juicy berries, but I hate a monkey's life in summer", the poor monkey complained. "The sun shines fiercely on my back. Leaves fall from shady trees and streams go dry. My body turns, my tongue is dry and I feel I shall die of thirst. Oh Father! I would give anything to be a water-buffalo and to lie in cooling pools of mud and never have to suffer the heat of a single summer day."

Yet again, the gentle, old Brahmin felt sorry for the poor creature. "Come into the hut, my child, and I will wash you with healing water of the Ganga and pray that your wish is granted", said the Brahmin, and that very moment, a great water-buffalo bounded out of the hut and raced straight back to the forest.

All through the heat of summer, the buffalo lay in cool and muddy pools. His body was cooled, his heart content, and he was sure that he had found his happiness at last.

Soon, the rains came to cool the thirsting earth and bring new life to bare, brown trees, and water to dry streams. Green leaves glowed on blossoming trees, birds sang on every bough and peacocks spread their gorgeous plumes, to dance in ecstasy.

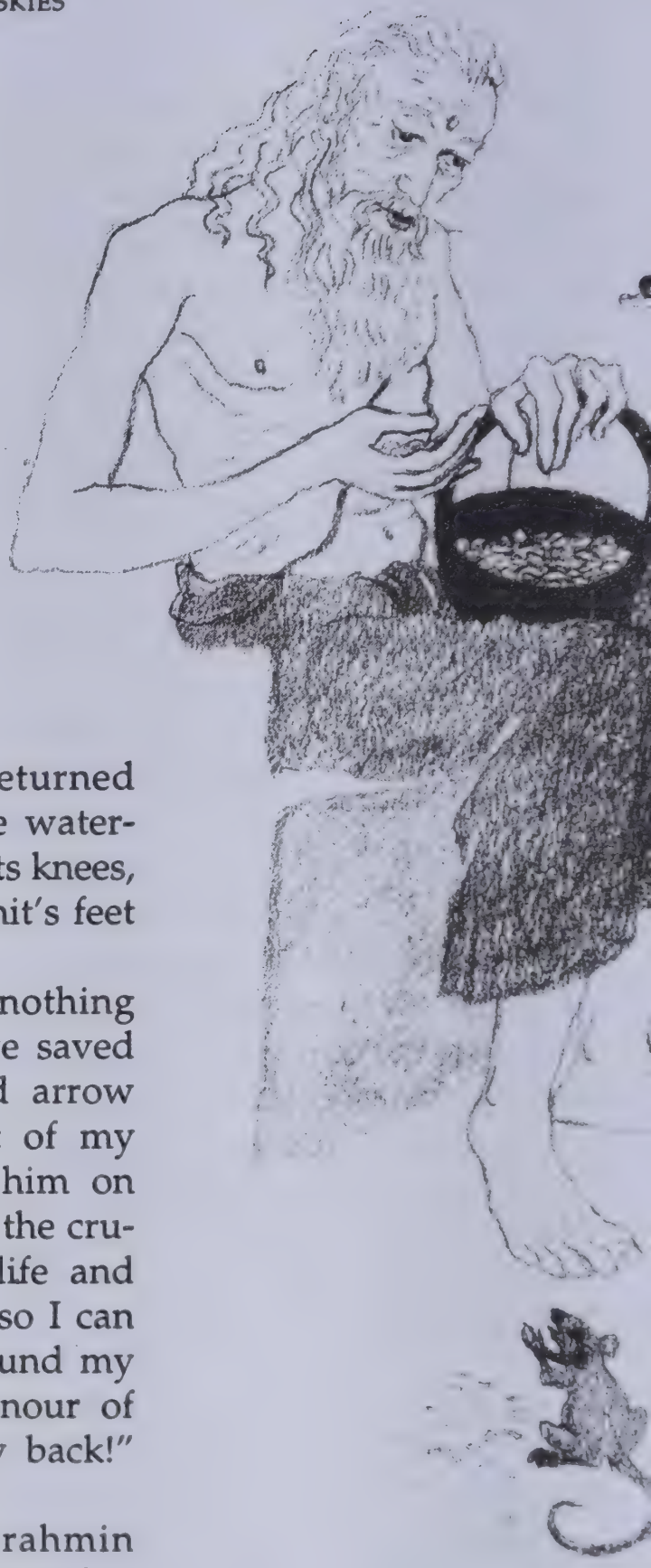
In the new-born joy of spring, the King of the land and his friends, rode into the forest on a mighty elephant that had swinging bells, hung from golden chains around its neck. At the sight of the water-buffaloes lazing in the muddy pool, the King took up his bow and let

loose a poisoned arrow. It shot across the forest like a streak of lightning and pierced the heart of a water-buffalo, killing it on the spot.

In terror, the water-buffalo leapt out of the pool and fled straight to the Brahmin's hut. When the Brahmin returned home that evening, the water-buffalo went down on its knees, put its head at the hermit's feet and wept bitterly.

"Beloved Father!, nothing but your blessings have saved me from the poisoned arrow that pierced the heart of my fellow-buffalo, killing him on the spot. Save me from the cruel fate of a buffalo's life and make me an elephant, so I can swing golden bells around my neck and have the honour of carrying a king on my back!" implored the buffalo.

As always, the Brahmin granted him his wish and a majestic elephant, with ebony skin and sparkling ivory tusks, trumpetted aloud and proudly



swayed back to the forest.

Once again, on a beautiful day in spring, the King rode into the forest on his royal elephant, with his beautiful Queen, adorned with glittering jewels, seated beside him. The elephant looked up at the Queen with wonder in his eyes. "How wonderful it must be to be a Queen, and to ride with a King, on the back of a royal elephant! thought the envious elephant. "It is no honour to be an elephant and to carry people on his back, even though they be King and Queen! I would much rather be a Queen and ride with a King on a royal elephant's back!"

That evening as the Brahmin was returning, he saw the elephant storming back to his hut. But, this time, he decided that this would be the last time he would use his holy powers to answer the animal's unending desires.

Tears rolled down the elephant's cheeks as he sobbed and said: "Father!, I have only one last boon to ask of you. It is little honour to be an elephant, even though it may carry a King and a Queen on its back. Please", implored the elephant, "make me a Queen, so I can ride with a King, on a royal elephant's back!"

"Stupid child! how can I change you into a Queen? Where can I find you a King and how can I find him a kingdom? The most I can do is to transform you into a beautiful maiden and then, perhaps, you could charm a King and become his Queen", replied the Brahmin. So he chanted a prayer and transformed the elephant into a beautiful maiden, with deep, dark eyes and shining black hair.

On the day of the festival of the Harvest Moon, bells from a thousand temples echoed across the river and beyond the mountains. The beautiful maiden rose with the rising sun, anointed her body with fragrant oil, decked herself with garlands of flowers and ran to the temple to pray.

As she reached the gates of the Temple, she saw the King alighting from his elephant. Quickly, she ran to the

river, fetched some water and washed the King's feet with tender care. Enchanted by her beauty, the King asked: "Who are you and where do you live, O lovely maiden?"

"I am a poor Brahmin's daughter and I live in a hut by the edge of the river", she bashfully replied.

"Lead me to you father's hut, for I wish to marry you and make you my Queen" said the King. Bursting with joy, she led him to the Brahmin's hut. The Brahmin blessed them and gave the King his consent to marry the beautiful maiden.

On the wedding day, there was great rejoicing in the Kingdom. The beautiful Queen dressed herself in a garment spun with golden thread. She wore a crown of emeralds and strings of precious pearls around her neck, as she proudly sat on a magnificent golden throne beside the King. The ladies of the palace showered fragrant rose petals and grains of saffron rice on the royal couple and sang songs of love and joy. The sound of music and the joyful beat of drums filled the air, as everybody, old and young, climbed upon roof-tops and onto the tallest trees, to watch their King and Queen ride through the Kingdom, on the way to their ivory palace beyond the green valley.

The Queen was in a heaven of delight, for at last, all her dreams had come true. But, one night, as the King lay asleep on his golden bed, she stole out of the palace, into the royal garden, to admire her own reflection in the moon-lit waters of the palace lake. But alas! she slipped and fell into the crystal waters and was never seen again. All the people of the Kingdom went sadly into mourning. In despair, the King mounted his swiftest horse and sped to the Brahmin's hut.

When the Brahmin saw the King approaching, he smiled a knowing smile, for he knew why the King was coming to his humble hut.

"I know what brings you here, good King", he said.

"The Queen whom you loved and have lost, was a miserable mouse, living in a hole by my humble hut. Out of compassion for the poor creature, I blessed him and changed him into a cat, a dog, a monkey, a water-buffalo, an elephant and last of all, into the beautiful maiden, who became your Queen! Never content with what she had, she always wanted more and more and even more!. Your beautiful Queen has drowned and died, admiring her own reflection in the moon-lit waters of the palace lake. But, do not grieve, good King, I shall make her immortal, for out of her body will be born a beautiful flower, that will bloom forever in the waters of Time, always yearning for the rising sun to kiss open her beautiful petals. This flower shall be called "Lotus", and if, perchance, you linger by the lake, you will hear a gentle whisper:

"Pause, O passer by, and listen. If you wish to be happy, be content with what you have and your sorrows will fall away, like dew-drops from a lotus petal."

And now my story is done,
Red is the setting sun,
The silence of evening settles,
On flowers that close their petals.

Evening shadows are creeping,
Birds on their branches are sleeping,
Stars appear in the skies,
Like slowly opening eyes.

The Moon from her place of hiding,
Over the night comes a-gliding,
Now that the night is deep,
Sleep, my little one, sleep.

The Crown of the Serpent King

Arjuna was a lonely prince, who lived in a tiny kingdom, enclosed in a silent valley, far away from any other kingdom. He had only one friend, Ananda, the son of the palace gardener. They played and laughed and sang together, and there were so many things they shared, apart from secret thoughts and fairy dreams.

One day, as they watched the wandering clouds sail across the far blue sky, over the mountains and into the world beyond, a secret longing filled their hearts.

"How wonderful it would be, Ananda, if you and I could drift with the wandering clouds, across the far blue sky, and over the mountains, to see what lies beyond!" said Arjuna with a dreamy sigh.

Like a flash of lightning, came the answer: "You are strong and I am not afraid!. Come, let us follow the wandering clouds across the valley and over the mountains, to see what lies beyond!"

The very next day, long before the sun rose over the mountains, and the palace guards lay fast asleep, the two friends stole the swiftest horses from the royal stables and rode out of the palace gates and beyond the city walls.

Swiftly, their horses bore them across miles and miles of stony land and sun-parched desert into a grassy, green valley with the mountains rising beyond. Higher and higher rose the mountains, steeper and steeper grew the climb, as they picked their zig-zag way through rock and boulder, climbing—always climbing. All at once, the ground fell away to lose itself in the deep dense shadows of a

forest, where the tiger and bear roam fearless and free, and no man dares to cross their path.

"Ananda! the night is dark and the forest fearful. Let us tether our horses to a tree and spend the night amidst its sheltering branches", said Arjuna, with a shadow of fear in his eyes. Soon, they dismounted, beside a sky blue lake covered with lotus blossoms and surrounded by great, green trees. Without a sound, they tethered their horses to the tallest tree, climbed to its uppermost branches and soon fell into a deep sleep.

In the dead of night, the silence of the forest was shattered by a fearful sound, like the angry hissings of a thousand snakes and the forest darkness was lit with a blinding light, as though a hundred suns had risen in the midnight sky! Dazzled by the blinding light, Arjuna and Ananda sat up in terror and saw to their horror, a mighty black serpent rising from the waters of the lake, wearing a sparkling jewel in the centre of its shining, black hood.

With kingly pride, the serpent turned its jewelled hood from side to side, casting a poisoned glance at all things, great and small. Coil by coil, it lifted yards and yards of shining black body from the waters, to storm towards the tallest tree and swallow in a single gulp, the horses, one by one. Then, lowering its jewelled hood, it dropped the sparkling jewel beneath the tree and sped with gliding twists and sliding loops, to the farthest corners of the forest, devouring everything that came its way.

A cold shiver ran down Arjuna's spine, but a great excitement filled Ananda's heart and danced in his eyes. "Look, Arjuna!", he whispered, "the serpent jewel, sparkling in the dust beneath us, is worth the wealth of seven kings and seven kingdoms!. Come what may, we must possess it!"

In a flicker of an eye-wink, Ananda sprang down from the tree. Quickly, with his sword, he dug a hole in the earth, buried the jewel and pressed the earth back firmly with his bare, brown feet. Then, fixing the sword on the precious spot, he hurried back to his perch on the tree.

Like the light of day fades with the dying sun, the light of the forest faded into darkness—darker than darkest night. Writhing with rage from hood to tail, its angry eyes shining like two rubies in the dark, the savage serpent stormed back to the tree. In a whirl of writhing coils, it circled round and round the tree, in search of its crown jewel. Wild with rage, it lashed the tree, and whipped the earth with its treacherous tail and knotted its body into a thousand loops and coils. Then, opening wide its monstrous mouth, it swallowed its own tail, and struck its hood against the sword and cut itself in two!

Stone-still, Arjuna and Ananda sat, huddled together, counting each breathless moment, till the first ray of light, broke through the horror of night. Holding his breath, Ananda looked down and saw the serpent lying limp and lifeless, in a pool of poisoned blood!

For a few moments, neither of them was able to speak. Then, with a cry of joy, Ananda leapt down from the tree, unearthed the jewel and slipped it into Arjuna's hand. "You hold the wealth of seven kingdoms in the palm of your hand, my friend!. Come! let us wash the jewel in the waters of the shining lake and it will sparkle like the mid-day sun!", shouted Ananda, as he ran ahead to the edge of the lake.

The horror of the night still lingered in Arjuna's eyes, as he held the jewel tightly in his hand and plunged his tightened fist into the waters of the lake, the waters parted and a golden ladder flashed across the waters, like a jewelled arrow. A strange magic seemed to lift their feet making the two friends descend, deeper and deeper into the bottomless lake. Of a sudden, they were imprisoned by

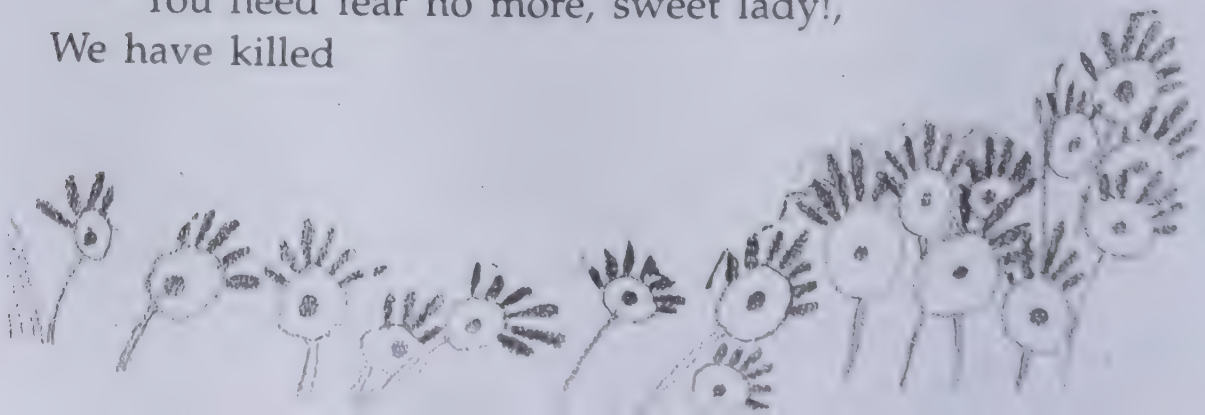
a dark, deep silver mist. They waited and they wondered, till at last, the mist began to slowly lift, unveiling a pearl palace, shimmering in rainbow light.

Full of wonder of excitement, Arjuna and Ananda ran across the pearl-paved threshold, and wandered through coral corridors and across gem-studded halls. A starry silence filled the air and a pearl-grey gloom spread its sadness everywhere. "Where had they come to? To the bottom of which lake? To the end of which world?" they wondered.

Suddenly, a tiny golden door, with a jewelled key, caught Ananda's eye. With a quick click, he turned the key. The door flew open and there, on a giant oyster shell lay a lovely maiden, clad in a garment spun of pearls. A timeless slumber filled her eyes, and her pale face glowed with mellow beauty, like a lotus blossom kissed by moonlight. Her lustrous hair fell to her ankles in a cluster of pearl-black curls and, wound around her swan-like neck, lay a sleeping serpent.

In hushed silence they moved, closer and closer to the sleeping maiden, gazing at her beauty with enchanted eyes, when all at once, the serpent jewel slipped through Arjuna's fingers and fell onto the sleeping maiden's brow. Startled, the sleeping serpent uncoiled itself and slithered away like a worm in fear. The sleeping maiden opened her eyes, to stare at the strangers in surprise and cry out in terror: "Good strangers! what brings you to death's door?. Run, run for your lives! My father's pearl palace now belongs to the king of serpents, who has devoured my father, and mother, my sisters and brothers and now I await my turn in horror!"

"You need fear no more, sweet lady!,
We have killed



the king serpent and stolen his crown jewel", said Arjuna, placing the serpent jewel in the palm of her pearl-white hand.

"Keep the jewel for yourself! I am too full of dreams and know that I will wake to find I was dreaming and you will have gone!" she replied, as she clung to Arjuna's arm, as though she were afraid he would vanish like a beautiful dream.

"You are not dreaming and I am not a dream!. I love you, dear princess and wish to marry you and take you back with me to my father's palace, where we shall live together for ever, in love and happiness", said Arjuna, as he tenderly slipped his ruby ring onto her delicate finger.

Day after day, the days flew happily by. The boys told the lovely lady about their mysterious journey to the pearl palace at the bottom of the lotus lake, and she in turn, told them about her father, who was the king of the pearl palace, and spoke of untold treasures that lie hidden in the unknown depths of the lotus lake.

Then, came a day when Ananda looked anxious and said: "Arjuna! your father and the people of his kingdom must be grieving for you, not knowing where you have gone and when you will return!. But, we have no horses and the way back to your father's kingdom is long and full of danger. You stay here with the pearl princess, while I go back to give the King news of our mysterious journey and tell him of your love for the beautiful pearl princess. Soon, I will return with elephants, horses and men, to take you and the pearl princess back to your father's palace."

Ananda fixed the day and the hour when he would return and Arjuna promised to meet him on the embankment of the lake, with the princess of the pearl palace. Soon after, Ananda bid farewell to the pearl princess, as Arjuna held the serpent jewel in his hand and led Ananda up the golden ladder, to the surface of the lake.

In silence, the two friends parted. Ananda walked a few steps, looked back, and then began to run, while

Arjuna watched and waited, till his friend was a vanishing speck in the distant haze.

Life flew by on wings of love for Arjuna and the pearl princess in the pearl palace under the lotus lake. But, one day, who knows why, the princess stole the serpent jewel from Arjuna's golden casket and rose with it to the surface of the lake.

Everything above the lake seemed full of fire and light! The pearl princess had never seen the light of day nor known the golden sunshine. Charmed by the glory of earth and of sky, she sat by the edge of the lake to gaze in wonder at the sun-lit mountains and flowering groves. She listened in rapture to the song of birds and watched them dance and flutter and fly, leaving their tiny footprints on the sand. Enchanted she walked, step by silent step, through the flowering grove, counting the colours of fragrant flowers, when all at once she was startled.

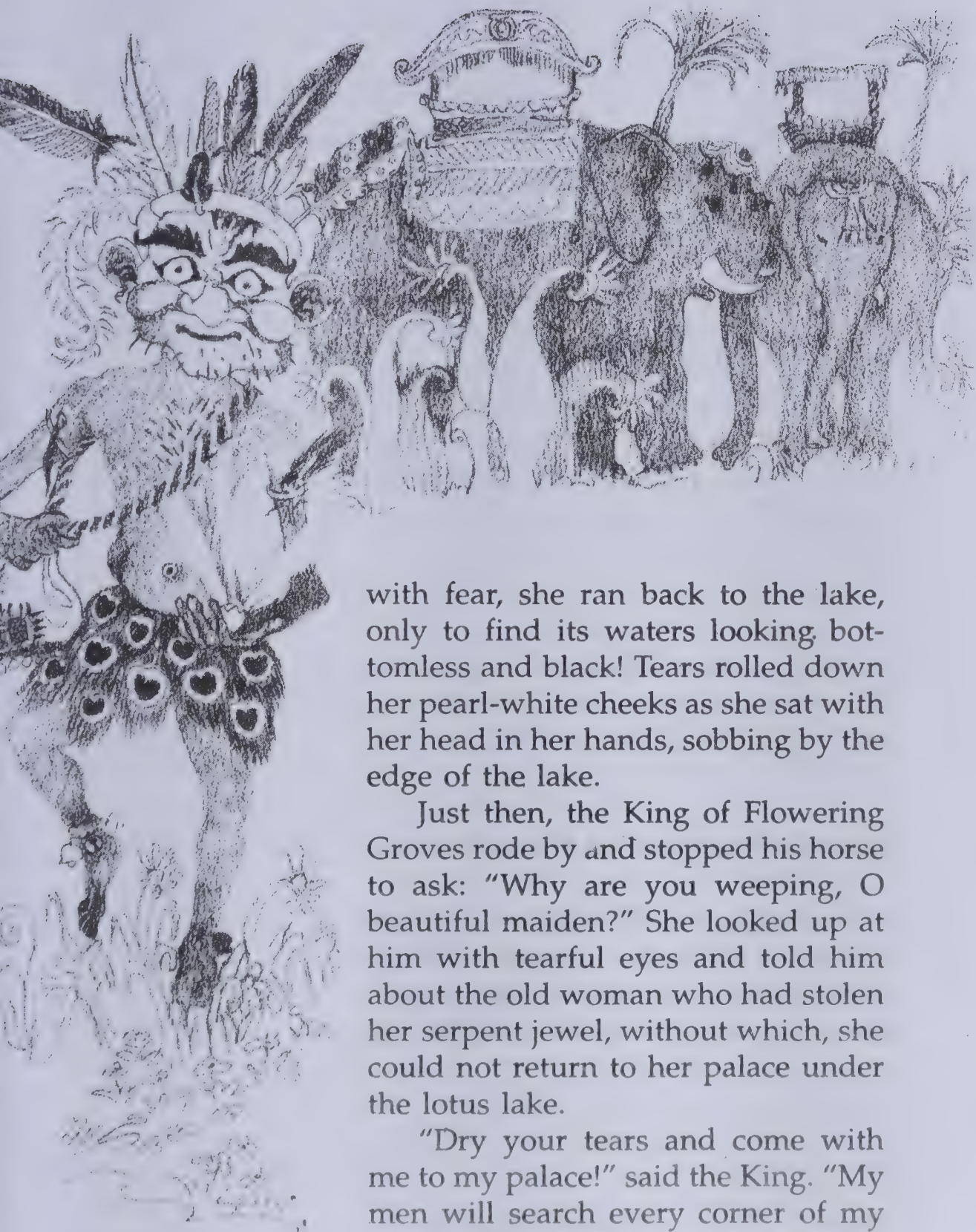
"What is it you hold in your hand? It dazzles and blinds my eyes!" said a harsh, old voice from under the trees.

Alarmed, the pearl princess looked around and saw a wrinkled old woman beneath a tree, weaving a gorgeous garment of purple and green, like the plumes of a proud peacock.

"Will you give me the garment you weave, in exchange for my garment starred with pearls?" asked the beautiful princess.

"You will have to wait until I have completed the hem of the garment I am weaving!" replied the old woman. "But, while you wait, you can bathe in the crystal waters of the lake and watch the sunbeams dance across the pearl-blue sky".

Without a thought, she laid the serpent jewel down beneath the tree, but as she walked to the lake, she turned back and alas! the old woman had vanished with the serpent jewel. In vain, she searched beneath the trees and around the lake, crying out aloud to the old woman. Pale



with fear, she ran back to the lake, only to find its waters looking bottomless and black! Tears rolled down her pearl-white cheeks as she sat with her head in her hands, sobbing by the edge of the lake.

Just then, the King of Flowering Groves rode by and stopped his horse to ask: "Why are you weeping, O beautiful maiden?" She looked up at him with tearful eyes and told him about the old woman who had stolen her serpent jewel, without which, she could not return to her palace under the lotus lake.

"Dry your tears and come with me to my palace!" said the King. "My men will search every corner of my kingdom and will surely find the old woman and bring back the serpent jewel to you."

"How long will I have to wait? How many hours or will it be days?" sobbed the pearl princess, in despair.

"Not for a single moment after your jewel has been found and returned to you!" replied the King.

While the princess drooped with sorrow in the King's

palace above the lake, Arjuna paced the jewelled halls of the pearl palace, sleepless and pale with sorrow, for he knew he could not go in search of the princess without the serpent jewel.

Meanwhile, on the fixed day, at the fixed hour, Ananda returned to the lake with elephants, horses and men. Eagerly he waited, his eyes fixed on the waters, hoping every moment that Arjuna and the pearl princess would appear. Then, a sudden frown crossed Ananda's forehead, as he wondered why Arjuna and his princess were not waiting for him at the embankment of the lake, as they had promised to do.

Suddenly, across the grove, came the sound of laughter, rippling and ringing through the air, and a jolly jingle of bells, danced with the breeze and echoed across the flowering grove. Horses neighed, elephants trumpetted and everybody turned to look, and from afar came a funny little man, wearing a skirt made of peacock plumes and a crown of many-coloured feathers on his head. Bunches of bells were tied around his ankles, as he reeled and wheeled and danced across the flowering grove.

Then came a sudden hush.... no sound, no movement. The funny little man stopped quite still, as he stood and started at the elephants and the horses. Then, with a jump and a spin he cried: "A diamond! a big diamond! Give me an elephant and I shall give you this diamond", he said as he slipped a glittering diamond out of his ragged bag.

Ananda immediately recognised the serpent jewel!

"Where did you find this diamond?" asked Ananda, as he snatched it out of his hand.

"My mother gave it to me" he replied with a great grin on his face.

"Where is your mother?" asked Ananda, breathing hard.

"My mother?! O-oo my mother? She is dead, d-e-a-d, d—e—a—d", chuckled the little fool, clapping his hands in glee.

"Then, take this elephant and go!" shouted Ananda.

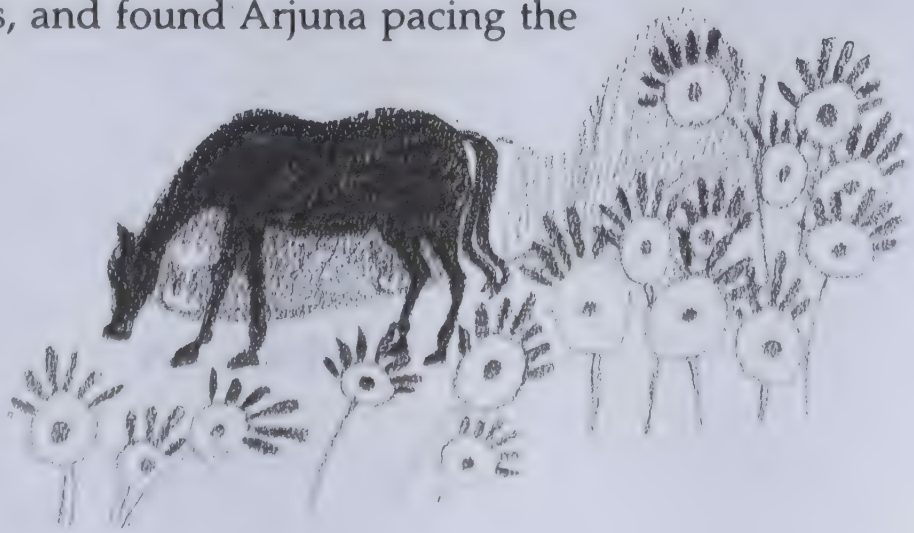
With a joyous cry, the crazy little man leapt into the air, and with a spin and a twirl, he landed on the elephant's back and rode away singing,

I am king, a king, a mighty king,
King of the kingdom of fools and of clowns,
When skies are grey and fortune frowns,
I will chuckle with joy and merrily sing,
I am a king, a king, a mighty king!
I will ride on the back of my elephant pink,
Singing and swinging and swaying with pride,
To woo the wee sparrow and make her my bride!
And together we will sing, and dance and drink
To the King, the King, the mighty king.

A thousand thoughts crossed Ananda's mind! For a moment, he stood quite still, trying to stop the throbbing in his head, so he could think clearly.

"Wait here, by the edge of the lake till I return!" he ordered his men, as he knelt down with the serpent jewel and thrust his hand into the waters of the lake. Once again, the waters parted and the jewelled ladder showed up. Rung by splendoured rung, Ananda descended, as the waters closed around him like a silken cloak.

Holding his breath in suspense, Ananda ran across the pearl-paved threshold and coral corridors, and found Arjuna pacing the jewelled hall with a frightened look on his face.



"Arjuna!" gasped Ananda "why were you not

waiting with your princess, on the embankment of the lotus lake? Where is the pearl princess?" he asked. Arjuna told him what he knew but said he did not know what had happened to the pearl princess or to the serpent jewel.

"Come with me! We have no time to waste!" said Ananda, as he held the serpent jewel and led Arjuna up the ladder. No sooner had they reached the edge of the lake, when a cry went up from the attendants, soldiers and guards and other men crowded around.

"The princess of the pearl palace has lost a jewel. Have you found it?"

"Where is the princess of the lotus lake?" asked Ananda with unbearable excitement.

"She lives in the palace, as a guest of our King" replied a soldier.

"Lead us the palace!" said Ananda, jumping onto his horse to gallop ahead, while Arjuna mounted the elephant and followed with his men.

"Who is the royal visitor who comes to visit me?" asked the King of Flowering Groves, as he watched the procession of elephants, horses and men approaching his palace.

Just then, Ananda alighted from his horse and bowing to the King he said: "Good King! my prince has come to fetch the princess of the pearl palace and wishes to thank you for your kindness". "I shall send for the princess immediately" said the King, welcoming Arjuna.

Sadly, with bowed head, the pearl princess walked up to the King and as she raised her eyes, she gave a little cry. "Arjuna and Ananda! Are you real or am I still dreaming?"

Arjuna took both her hands and covered them with kisses and Ananda walked up to her and gave her the serpent jewel.

Arjuna thanked the King once again and invited him to his father's kingdom and soon they set out on their long, long journey homewards—through the forest, across the mountain and far, far beyond. And, as they rode away, the

pearl princess sighed and said with a dreamy look in her eyes:

"To me, it is all like a dream. I have often dreamt before!"

And now my story is done
Red is the setting sun,
The silence of evening settles
On flowers that close their petals.

Evening shadows are creeping,
Birds on their branches are sleeping.
Stars appear in the skies,
Like slowly-opening eyes.

The moon from her place of hiding,
Over the night comes a-gliding.
Now that the night is deep,
Sleep, my little one, sleep.

The Moon-Pearl Flower

In days gone by, there lived a great and gracious King. He had seven beautiful wives and lived in a golden palace spangled with emeralds and pearls, that glittered by day and sparkled by night.

All the wisdom and riches of the world were in his keeping. His treasury was laden with precious gems and his stables famed for stately steed and mighty elephant. He had a large and loyal army, wise and able statesmen and happy and devoted subjects. What more could any King want?

But, with all his wealth and all his power, the King was miserable and sad, for though he had seven beautiful wives, not one of them had borne him a child. The seven Queens and all the people of the kingdom were also unhappy to see their King so miserable and so sad.

One day, long after the stars had faded and sleepy-eyed dawn opened the gates of the eastern sky to the rising sun, the seven Queens walked down to the river to bathe. As they reached the edge of the river, a rainbow mist floated towards them like a silken curtain blown by the wind, scattering pearl-drop rain. The seven Queens watched in wonder, as through the haze, came a little old man with a silvery, moon-spun beard, which flowed on and on till it met and merged with the flowing river.

In a voice like the echo of morning breeze, he said to the oldest Queen: "Take these herbs and grind them to a paste. Divide the paste into seven equal parts—for each Queen there must be an equal portion. Then mix it with

the milk of roses and drink it to a prayer. To each of you, will be born a beautiful prince." Like the morning dew, the little old man vanished and the seven queens hurried back to the palace, their faces beaming with joy.

As they reached the palace, the eldest Queen said to the two youngest ones: "Go quickly to the temple with offerings of flowers and fruit, while we grind the magic herbs into a paste. When you return, we shall divide the paste *equally* between us and pray that we shall each be blessed with a child".

Soon, the two young Queens returned from the temple, full of new-born joy. But their joy turned to sorrow, when they found that the older queens had already divided the magic herbs between themselves, leaving nothing for either of them.

The youngest Queen wept bitterly. But, the older one comforted her, saying: "Wipe your tears, little sister! Come!, we shall wash the marble stone on which the herbs were ground, mix it with the milk of roses, and drink it to a prayer!"

After nine moons had waxed and waned, a son was born to each of the five older Queens. They were all wonderful little infants, with gentle faces and skins that glowed like gold. The proud King showered gifts of gold and precious jewels on the five Mother Queens. The poor were fed and the streets strewn with coins of gold and of silver. Music and merriment filled the air and everybody sang and danced, for at last, the King was a happy man!

"But", you will ask "what happened to the two youngest Queens?" Well, to one Queen was born a Monkey and to the other, was born an Owl! Shocked and ashamed, the King ordered two of his trusted men to take the young Queens to a deep and dark forest, far, far away from the palace, and to leave them there along with their poor little babies, the Monkey and the Owl.

As the days went by, the five Princes in the palace grew up into brave and handsome men. They were taught how

to ride restless horses, wield a sword with subtle skill and bring down the fleet-footed deer with a single shaft from the bow.

In the forest, the monkey and the owl also grew up. They learned the language of the beasts—to roar and to growl, to trumpet and to howl! They played all day long in cool, green groves and at sundown, tired of play, they returned to drop fast asleep—The Monkey on his mother's lap and the Owl on his mother's shoulder.

One fateful day, the five Princes and their men rode into the forest for a hunt. The sun was shining through tangled trees, painting patterns of light and shade on the leaf-strewn path. A frightened deer flashed past and in an eye-wink, the eldest Prince plucked his arrow, held it taut and then took aim.

Just then, a quivering voice from the tree above cried: "O good Prince, we pray you, do not kill our innocent friend!"

Alarmed, the Prince dropped his bow and looked up to see a Monkey and an Owl, looking down at him with tears in their eyes. "Is it possible", asked the Prince, turning to his attendant, "that forest creatures can speak like human beings?" "All things are possible in this world, O young Prince!" answered the attendant, lowering his gaze, "a Monkey and an Owl were born to your Father, the King!"

"What!" shouted the Prince in anger, "Do you mean to tell me that those vile jungle creatures are my brothers? I, a Prince of royal and noble birth, swear by my sword, to kill them before I return to the palace!" He then turned to the other Princess and said, "Come my brothers, let us rid ourselves of these two jungle creatures who are supposed to be our brothers!"

But by then, the Monkey and the Owl had vanished. The Princes and their men searched.

Everywhere that eye could see,
Every branch and every tree,
Every cavern, and every brook,
Every corner, and every nook,
Up above and all around,
Overhead and underground,
But neither of the two could be found!

At nightfall, the five Princes returned to the palace, spurring their horses in bitter rage.

The Monkey and the Owl returned to their shack. But that night, when all was still and their Mothers lay fast asleep, they crept out of the shack and sat together under the stars. After a long pause...the Monkey spoke: "So brother! now we know that we are Princes of royal and noble birth after all!"

One day, the silence of the jungle was broken with the loud beating of drums, as messengers came from an unknown land, to spread the news that a certain Princess with lotus eyes and cloud-black hair was looking for a bride-groom. But, said the messengers, the Princess would only wed the brave Prince who could seek and find her and steal the moon-pearl flower that she wears in her hair!

Nobody knew her name nor the name of the kingdom to which she belonged! Yet, every Prince, from every Kingdom, set out to seek and to find her.

Our five handsome Princes also set out, in a golden boat with silver sails, to seek the unknown Princess.

When the Monkey heard of the strange quest, he whispered to his brother: "Now that we know we too are Princes of royal and noble birth, let us also set out, to seek and to find the Princess of the Unknown Land!" And so, the Monkey and the Owl set out in a coconut shell, which was their boat. They sang merrily as they sailed along,

Here we set sail, my dear brother and I,

Over the waters and under the sky,
To steal the flower and to win the fair hand,
Of the Princess of the Unknown Land.
Whether we live, or whether we die,
We will go a-sailing, my dear brother and I.

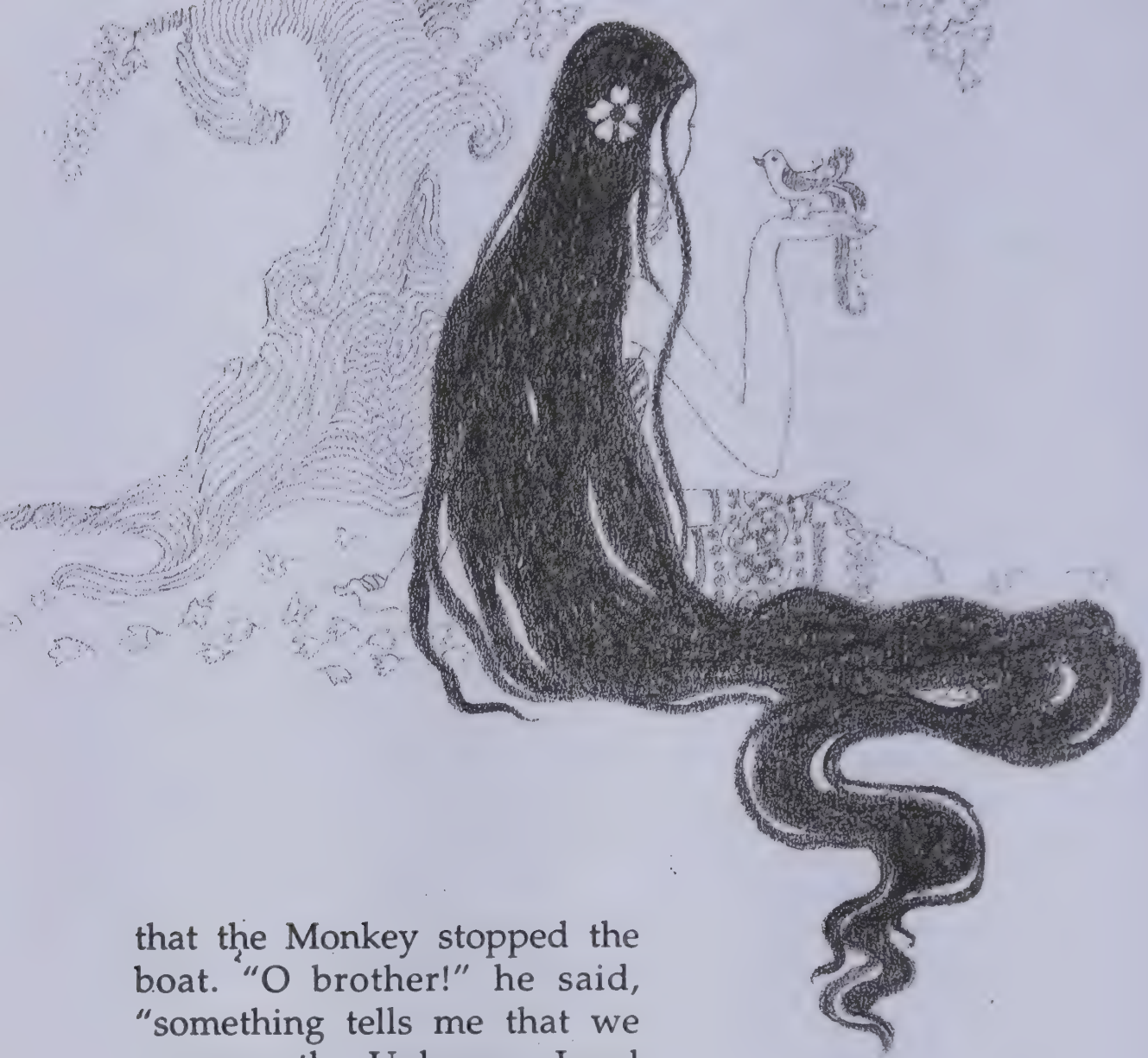
For thirty days and thirty nights, the five Princes voyaged in their golden boat until they came to a lonely island. There was bright sunshine everywhere, but neither light nor warmth anywhere! Fields of paddy stretched on and on for miles on end, but there was not a single grain of paddy to be seen anywhere. Trees grew there, but they bore neither flower not fruit!

This was the Island of "Make-Belief", where three wicked witches lived. The first had a single eye in the middle of her forehead that whirled round and round in rapid circles, throwing out sparks of blue-green fire! The second witch had two upturned noses, like twin chimneys, that spurted and snorted purple fumes into the air! The third had a single ear at the back of her head, that flapped and fluttered like a giant fan, turning and churning the air into a wild typhoon.

When the three witches caught sight of the five Princes in the golden boat, they opened wide their eyes and noses and ears to flash and fume and storm! The sky was in flames and purple fumes of poison filled the air. The sea began to rock and to roll and a mighty wave, frothing and foaming, leapt up, to swing and swirl and to swallow the five Princes and their golden boat.

A little while later, the Monkey and the Owl sailed by in their coconut-shell boat. The three old witches laughed and laughed to see the silly little sailors voyaging bravely, cutting the water with monkey-paw and owl-wing! It was all so funny and so foolish, so innocent and so harmless, that the three old witches let them sail by.

But soon, the coconut-sheel boat drifted into a sleepy lagoon. So still were the waters, so mysterious its depths,



that the Monkey stopped the boat. "O brother!" he said, "something tells me that we are near the Unknown Land that we seek. You stay up here to wait and to watch, while I dive into the mysterious and dark waters, to see what lies beyond."

Down....Down....Down....the Monkey dived, deeper, deeper and deeper into the bottomless lagoon. The water grew colder and colder, freezing his blood and chilling him to the bone. The poor little creature grew more and more afraid of the deep, dark silence, not ever dreaming that one could be so lost and so alone. When, of a sudden, he was surrounded by

a glassy green mountain wall and a mighty wave heaved and hurled him over the magic mountain, into an enchanted garden!

And there, under a blossoming tree, on a bed of flowers, lay a lovely maiden, talking to a golden bird. A moon-pearl flower glittered in her hair and the Monkey knew at once, that she was the Princess of the Unknown Land! Closer and closer, he quietly crept towards the Princess and then, holding his breath in awe, with trembling paw, he quickly snatched the moon-pearl flower from her hair! The golden bird,

Flapped its wings in wild despair,
Crying "Princess! where, O! where
Is the moon-pearl flower that you wore in your hair?"

Startled, the Princess raised her hands to her hair and swiftly glanced back, to see the Monkey holding the moon-pearl flower in its trembling paw! With a cry of horror, she turned away, to bury her face in her hands and to sob in sorrow. In terror, the golden bird sang:

O Princess sweet, you must not cry,
If you break your word, you shall surely die!

At the sound of the sorrowful song of the bird, the Princess's sisters came flying with the weeping wind, across the flowering grove, and when they saw the Monkey holding the moon-pearl flower in its hairy paw, they gasped with grief and wept in woe.

The poor little Monkey stood and started. His forehead creased with a thousand lines and his heart throbbed with fear. Then, a sudden thought like lightning flashed across the mind, "Have I not braved the perils of the seven seas and faced the dangers of their dismal depths? Why then, should I fear to claim my rightful reward?"

The little Monkey was no longer afraid. With his tail in

the air, he proudly sprang across to the Princess and tenderly stroking her cloud-black hair he said:

"O Princess beautiful!
Pale as a flower and sweet as a song,
Tell me, to whom do you belong?"
Drying her tears, the Princess whispered,
Six sisters have I, but no brother,
Once I belonged to my Father and my Mother,
But now, I belong to you, and to no other!

Then, the Monkey drew closer and gazing into her deep, dark eyes, he whispered,

Lovely Princess, lotus-eyed,
Come with me and be my bride!

But, before she could reply, her eldest sister cried out:

O No! No! No!
She cannot go!
For better or for worse,
We are under a curse,
Seven beautiful sisters are we,
Under the rule of the Lord of the Sea,
Without his consent, she dare not go,
Anywhere, anywhere. No! No! No!

"Come follow me and I shall lead you to the Sea Lord's cave!" she said to the Monkey, with a mysterious smile on her lips. A cold ache crept around the Monkey's heart, as he followed the Princess, over rugged rocks and creviced crags, into a gloomy, grey gorge. A tiny track wound in and out of coral cliffs and a coral cave rose up in lonely splendour. "There, in the coral cave, lives the Lord of the Seven Seas!" the Princess said, as she waved him farewll and vanished with the wind.

Full of excitement, the little Monkey entered the coral cave. But alas! his uncertain feet slipped and he fell, and the coral cave closed in upon him. Alone, he lay in the darkness, gasping for breath and praying for light. A stabbing pain shot through every bone of his body and the poor Monkey was sure that he would die.

At that very moment, something wonderful happened!. It was as though dawn had cracked the coral cave and pierced it with a ray of light. Dazzling stars danced across the Monkey's eyelids to open his eyes, and he saw a little old man standing outside the coral cave. His long and silvery beard shimmered like white lightning from a pearl cloud and in a voice that sounded like the echo of morning breeze, he said, "Follow me and I shall lead you to your journey's end".

It was all too much like a dream and yet, so real! In a daze, the Monkey followed the little old man through ragged roof and jagged ridge, into the enchanted garden. There, under a flowering tree, sat the six older princesses, laughing over the trick they had played on the Monkey. But, the youngest Princess sat aloof, with a rosary of lotus buds in her hand, praying for the Monkey's safety.

No sooner had the little old man stepped into the garden, than the sea began to surge and swell, rising and revealing the five lost Princes in their golden boat and the little Owl in his coconut-shell boat. Like a cloud, the little old man floated across the waters, to return with the five Princes and the little Owl. Then, taking the Monkey and the Owl in his arms, he chanted a magic prayer. Lo and behold! the two little jungle creatures were changed into handsome Princes, with gentle faces and skins that glowed like gold!.

"All you seven Princes were born of a magic boon and the seven Princesses were born to be your brides", said the little old

man. "But, by a trick of fate, the two youngest Princes were born with animal bodies, so they could rescue the seven Princesses from the curse that lay upon them. Now that the spell is broken, rejoice!. But, first go to the forest to fetch the two young Queens, and then return to your Father's kingdom with your lovely brides!"

And then, like the morning dew, the little old man vanished into nowhere, and the seven Princes and the seven Princesses, sailed away in the golden boat with silver oars, across the seven seas.

And now my story is done,
Red is the setting sun,
The silence of evening settles,
On flowers that close their petals.

Evening shadows are creeping,
Birds on their branches are sleeping.
Stars appear in the skies,
Like slowly opening eyes.

The moon from her place of hiding.
Over the light comes a-gliding
Now that the night is deep,
Sleep, my little one, sleep.

Peacock Plumes

In days gone by, there was an ancient city which was the richest and most beautiful city in the world, encircled by towering mountains that swept skywards to reach the sun-kissed clouds. Through the valley, like a streak of silver lightning flowed a river, wandering into dreamy lotus pools that looked like emerald islands floating on a silver cloud.

Across the river, in a magnificent mansion, there lived a rich merchant with his three beautiful daughters. So good and so gentle were his daughters that the merchant loved them dearly. There was nothing in the world that he did not give them. They played with golden dolls that opened and closed their emerald eyes. They had magic birds that could sing enchanted songs and crystal dream boats that took them to mysterious worlds of fairy dreams.

But, though the rich merchant truly loved his three daughters, he loved himself more. And, even more than himself, he loved his worldly wealth and his earthly possessions.

One day, the merchant called for his daughters and said to them, "Dear daughters, tell me by whose fortune do you live and enjoy all the wonderful things of the world?"

The eldest one, bowed in respect and replied: "Dear Father, I get my good living by your good fortune."

The second one, kissed her father's head and said: "Good Father, all the wealth and beauty of my life comes from your fortune." But the third one looked straight into

the merchant's eyes and said: "Father, I live by my own fortune and my luck".

"Ungrateful child!" said the angry merchant, "This very day, you shall not only leave my house, but also all the precious gifts I have showered on you. Then, I shall see how you live by your own fortune and your luck!"

The little girl wiped her tears and said, "O Father! I shall do as you please, but grant me one last wish. Please allow me to take with me, my box of needle and thread". The Father granted the wish and the poor little girl was sent away to a forest, far away from the city and beyond the mighty mountains.

At the first glimpse of the forest, the girl was charmed by the green grandeur of tall trees, swaying to the melody of singing streams. She looked with wonder at the starry snowdrops and shy violets, growing in the cleft of moss-covered rocks. Enchanted, she watched the lightning flash of the blue-bird's flight and followed the trail of butterflies bright, as she danced to the tap-tap-tap of the woodpecker's beat. But, as the dying glow of the sunset sky deepened amethyst dusk, her thoughts returned to her home, her father and her sisters and the beautiful city that she so dearly loved. The sudden silence of the forest stilled her joy, as she sat beneath a great, green tree and wept bitterly.

When the great, green tree saw the little girl weeping, it shook with sorrow, for it knew the dangers of the forest night. "Sweet child!" whispered the kind tree, "in a short while, the forest beasts will come out of their lairs in search of prey and if they see you, they will devour you. But do not fear, little one, I shall save you from all harm. When you see my trunk opening, step inside and the trunk will close around you and you will be safe through the night".

In a moment, the trunk opened and the little girl stepped in as it closed gently around her.

Soon, the hungry beasts came out in search of their prey. Crazed by the scent of human blood, they circled

round and round the great green tree. They roared and growled and howled, as they clawed its bark and dug deep furrows into its trunk. They tore down its branches, scattered it leaves and crushed its fruit. But, with the first ray of morning light, the forest quietened and the beasts returned to their lairs.

"The sun is shining and the forest has awoken to a beautiful day! Now, you can safely come out", said the kind tree. But, when the little girl stepped out, and saw the poor tree stripped bare of branches, leaves and fruit, she gasped with sorrow and cried, "Good Mother Tree! how much pain you have suffered, to save me from the brutal beasts! I will fetch some moist earth and smooth it over your bleeding trunk, to soothe and heal your wounds".

As the little girl gently smoothed the moist earth over the Mother Tree's wounds, she said: "Thank you my child! My wounds are soothed and I am no longer in pain. Come, eat the fruit of my sister tree that grows beside me and listen to what I say. In the heart of the forest, there is a pool of crystal water, where a thousand lotus blossoms bloom. Gather a handful of lotus seeds each day, scatter them around the pool and return to me when the sun goes down."

Though the little girl did not understand the reason, she went to the lotus pool, picked a handful of lotus seeds, scattered them around the pool, and as the sun was setting, she returned to her home in the Mother Tree's trunk.

The next morning, when the little girl went back to the lotus pool, she saw a brilliant blaze of blue-green plumes, shimmering in the golden sunshine. A thousand splendoured peacocks had flown down to the pool, to feast on the delicious lotus seeds. They quarrelled, pecked and plucked each other's plumes, as they snapped up the seeds, leaving behind them a glittering trail of peacock plumes.

Full of excitement, the little girl gathered the plumes and ran back to show them to the Mother Tree. Swaying

with delight, the tree said, "Now, my little one, stitch these plumes together with your needle and thread and make them into fans. When you have made a hundred fans, go with them to the edge of the forest and sell them to the travelling merchants."

Day after day, the girl would go to the pool, gather a handful of lotus seeds, scatter them around the lotus pool and return with a bunch of peacock plumes. Whe she had gathered enough plumes, she fashioned them into a hundred fans of exquisite beauty and went with them to the edge of the forest, to sell them to the merchants.

All day she waited, with the beautiful fans arranged arund her, when suddenly, in the distant haze, she saw a mysterious copper-cloud floating across the solitary desert sands. Soon, a caravan of camels showed up, shrouded in a veil of desert dust. As the caravan reached the edge of the forest, the thristy camels went down on their knees, to drink water from a forest stream and rest

their weary limbs. A dust-covered merchant came up to her and said, "Beautiful maiden! These are rare and exquisite fans that you sell! Will you exchange them for a bale of scarlet silk and a necklace of turquoise and pearls?" The girl willingly agreed and ran back to the Mother Tree.

When the Mother Tree saw the bale of scarlet silk and the turquoise and pearl necklace, she said, "Now, my child, sew yourself a gown of scarlet silk and wear the beautiful necklace of turquoise and pearls, and you will be the Queen of the forest!. Then, collect many more peacock plumes and when you have gathered enough to make a thousand more fans, take them to the edge of the forest once again, and sell them to the desert merchants."

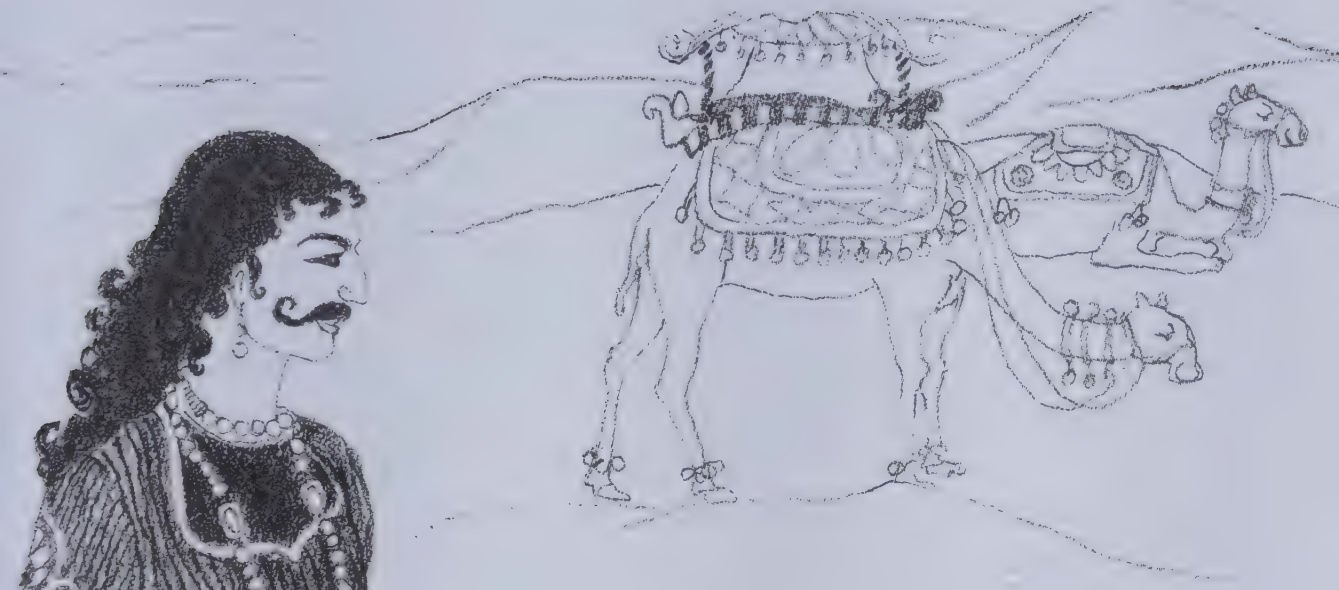
The girl made a thousand fans, more exquisite than the ones she had made before, and took them to the edge of the forest. Soon the copper-cloud appeared and once again, the merchant ran up to her and said, "Lovely lady, I bring you good news! I have sold your fans to my King and he wishes to have a thousand more of your wondrous fans".

But the girl looked thoughtful and, with a twinkle in her eye, replied: "Tell your King that, if he wishes to have a thousand fans, he will have to come himself to fetch them!"

"Foolish lady!" exclaimed the angry merchant, "the way is long and the journey across the desert is harsh and lonesome. Besides, no King has ever crossed the desolate, desert sands!"

"Even so, your King will have to come himself, if he wishes to buy my fans!" said the girl, as she collected the fans and ran back to the forest.

Many days went by and when it was time for the caravan to return, the girl dressed in the scarlet silken gown that she had stitched for herself, wore the necklace of turquoise and pearls, and waited at the edge of the forest, with her fans arranged around her. Once again, the copper dust cloud floated across the desert sands, but this time, it was the King himself who came!



At the first glance, the King fell deeply in love with the beautiful girl. "Beautiful one!" said the King, gazing at her with adoring eyes. "What would you like in exchange for a thousand fans?"

"I would like to be your Queen!" she bashfully replied.

"Then return with me to my kingdom across the desert and I shall marry you and you will be my Queen!" said the King.

"But, I belong to the forest and in the forest I shall remain. If you desire to marry me and make me your Queen, you will have to build a palace for me and live here in the forest with me", she answered.

So deeply in love was the King, that he ordered his men to build a grand palace in the forest for him and his future Queen.

Hundreds of men were employed from the skirting villages and towns, the forest was cleared, a thousand trees were felled, except for the kind Mother Tree, and a green jade palace rose up around her beloved

Mother Tree, who had given the little girl shelter and love.

In the new-born joy of love, the King married the beautiful girl and gave her all his riches and precious treasures. And, as he led the Queen to the jade palace, the Mother Tree swayed with joy and scattered her choicest blossoms across the golden threshold, to bless them.

One day, many years later, as the Queen stood by her window to look out into the palace garden, she saw a ragged old man watering the plants in her rose garden. Something about his proud face and noble bearing reminded her of her father. Confused, she turned to the King who was standing beside her and said: "That ragged old man who is watering my rose garden, has a familiar face and strangely, he reminds me of my father! But, my father is a wealthy merchant and lives like a king in a majestic mansion! Let us call him up to the palace and ask him who he is and where he belongs".

The poor old man, not knowing why he was called, trembled in fear, as he was led up to the palace and into the King's chamber. Humbly, he bowed to the King and as he looked up at the Queen, he recognised his daughter! With a startled sob he cried: "My child, my youngest daughter, little do you know how deeply I have regretted sending you away from my house into the forest, because of my pride of wealth and worldly possessions!"

The King looked aghast, but the Queen said: "Indeed, he is my own father and though he sent me away to the forest, I still love him as I always did before."

Sad memories gripped the Queen's heart and words fell like drops of ice, as she asked: "What misfortune brings you to my door, dear Father?"

For a few moments there was a sad silence, as the old man was too shocked and ashamed to speak. But, after a few breaths he answered: "My child, I have lost all my wealth and precious possessions! Ashamed of being poor and penniless, I left the city, to live in the forest and have toiled day and night to earn a few pennies".

"Where are my beloved sisters?" asked the Queen, looking at her father through a haze of tears.

"They are married to wealthy merchants and now that I am poor and penniless, they are ashamed to own me as their father", said the old man, in sorrow.

"Dear Father, you shall have all the wealth that you had before and even more, and you will live with me in my palace with pride and honour!" said the Queen.

Tenderly, she put her arm around her father and as she led him to the royal guest house, the old man sighed and said, "You were right, my child—nobody lives by another's fortune and luck, except by his own fortune and his own luck. Now, I know that all the wealth and treasures of the world can never buy love".

And now my story is done,
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On flowers that close their petals.

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Birds on their branches are sleeping.
Stars appear in the skies,
Like slowly-opening eyes.

The moon from her place of hiding,
Over the night comes a-gliding.
Now that the night is deep,
Sleep, my little one, sleep.

Hiramon—The Talking Bird

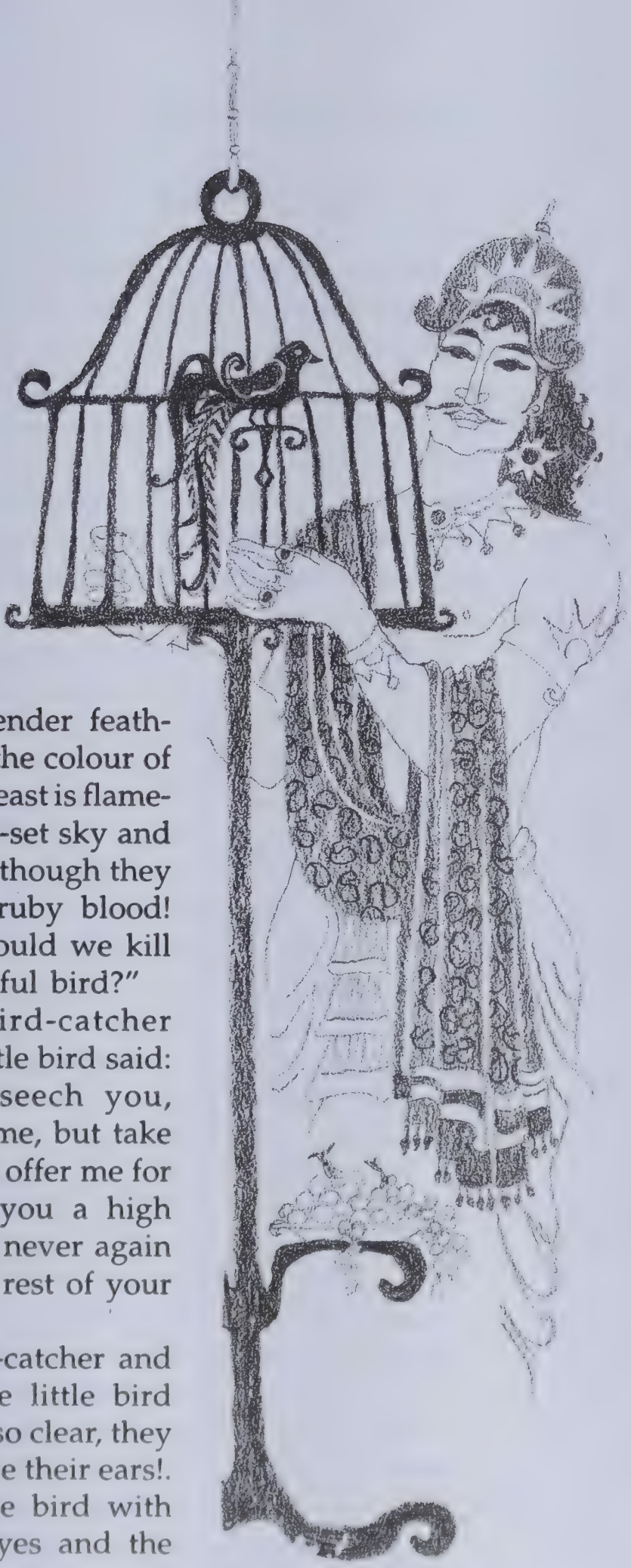
On the outskirts of a forest, in a broken, thatched hut, there lived a bird-catcher and his wife. Day after day, through all the seasons of the year, the poor bird-catcher wandered from forest to forest, to catch a few birds to sell them in the market place. But the few pennies he brought home were barely enough for their needs and they were always hungry and in want.

One night, when he returned to his hut, his wife said to him, "My dear, I will tell you why we are always in want. It is because you sell every bird you catch. Perhaps, if we eat some of the birds, our luck may change and we may no longer be in want. Tomorrow, we will not sell a single bird you catch and I shall cook you a delicious meal of rice and bird-meat, and then we shall see if we have better luck".

The bird-catcher readily agreed to what his wife said. So, early next morning he went into the forest, but that day, to his sorrow, he did not find even a single bird—either on the tree-tops or in the sky. All day he waited and he watched and even as the sun was setting, not a single bird returned to its nest on the tree tops.

Tired and disheartened, he decided to return to his hut, but just as he was leaving, he caught a glimpse of a solitary bird, perched on a lone palm tree, singing a sweet song of twilight dreams. He immediately caught the bird and took it home to his wife to cook.

"What an extraordinary bird you have caught!" she exclaimed, as she took the frightened little bird in her hand



and caressed its tender feathers. "Its wings are the colour of sun-lit clouds, its breast is flame-orange like the sun-set sky and its tiny feet look as though they are painted with ruby blood! With what heart could we kill and eat this beautiful bird?"

Before the bird-catcher could speak, the little bird said: "O Mother, I beseech you, please do not kill me, but take me to the King and offer me for sale. I will fetch you a high price and you will never again be in want for the rest of your life!"

When the bird-catcher and his wife heard the little bird speak so loud and so clear, they could hardly believe their ears!. They looked at the bird with wonder in their eyes and the

wife said: "O beautiful bird, what price shall we ask of the King?"

"Leave that to me", replied the bird. "Just take me to the King and offer me for sale. When the King asks you the price say "Your Majesty, the bird will tell you its own price!"

The next day, the bird-catcher and his wife took the bird to the King's palace and offered it for sale. The King was charmed by the beauty of the birds and asked: "What price do you desire for this beautiful bird?"

"O! great King", said the bird-catcher, "the bird will tell you its own price".

"What?" said the King in surprise, "Do you mean to tell me that the bird can tell me its own price?"

"Yes, my Lord!" said the bird-catcher "be pleased to ask the bird its own price and it will tell you what it expects".

The King, in jest, turned to the bird and asked: "Well, beautiful bird, what is your name and what is the price you have set for yourself?"

"My name is Hiramon", replied the bird, "I belong to a family of rare birds. My price, O good King, is a thousand golden coins".

The King was very surprised to hear the bird talk and even more surprised at the price the bird had set for itself. "Hiramon", asked the King, "do you not think that the price you ask is much too high?"

"My Lord!" replied Hiramon, "do not think the price is too high, for I will be of great service to you".

The King laughed and asked, "Pray, what great service can you offer me, Hiramon?"

"Your Majesty will find out in due course", replied the bird wisely.

The King was so fascinated to hear the bird talk and talk so wisely, that he ordered his royal treasurer to give the bird-catcher a thousand golden coins and ordered that a special golden cage be made to house the extraordi-

nary little bird.

Now the King had four beautiful wives, but they hated one another so much that they quarrelled with each other from morning till night. The King was in despair and did not know what to do or how to stop them quarrelling. But, ever since Hiramon came into the king's life, he forgot all about his quarrelling queens, for he spent all his time with his wise little bird.

The bird, in turn, sang and danced to entertain the King. It talked to him and gave him advice about matters of state. And, when the King was unhappy, he would recite a thousand names of different Gods and Goddesses or chant a holy prayer. Thus, Hiramon became the inseparable companion of the King.

The queens grew very jealous of the King's love for Hiramon and were determined to kill the bird. For once, in all their lives, they got together and the oldest queen conspired with the other queens and said, "Let us go to the bird, while the King is out on his hunt and ask him which one of us is the ugliest of all, and the one whom the bird considers the ugliest, will strangle and kill the bird".

One beautiful day in spring, when the forest echoed with the sweet song of birds, the King went hunting with his friends. While he was away, the four queens came into the Jewelled Hall, where the bird lived in its golden cage and the oldest queen asked: "O wise bird, we have heard that your judgement is fair and true. Please tell us which one of us is the most beautiful and which of us is the ugliest?"

"How can I give you a wise answer", said the bird, "when I am locked up in this cage? If you wish to have my fair judgement, you will have to let me out of my cage, so I may look at each one of you with a discerning eye and only then, would I be able to give you my true judgement".

While the queens shut all the doors and windows to make sure that the bird would not escape, Hiramon looked around the Jewelled Hall and noticed a water hole

through which he could escape. The eldest queen then opened the door of the cage and let Hiramon out. The bird looked intently at each queen from head to toe and then said, "The beauty of not a single one of you can compare to the little toe of the beautiful princess who lives on the other side, across seven oceans and thirteen rivers!" The queens felt slighted that their beauty was belittled by the wicked bird and they rushed to catch and strangle it, but Hiramon escaped through the water hole and took shelter in a wood-cutter's hut nearby.

The next day, the King returned from his hunt and went straight into the Grand Hall to greet Hiramon in his golden cage. Alarmed to find the cage empty, the distressed King questioned the queens, the servants, the guards and even his ministers, but nobody seemed to know how and when and where the bird had flown. Drums were beaten throughout the city, proclaiming that the King had lost his beloved bird and anybody who would bring it back to the King would be rewarded with a hundred golden coins.

The wood-cutter rejoiced, as he ran to the palace with the bird and was given a hundred coins of gold. The King held the beautiful bird to his heart and with tears in his eyes, asked, "Hiramon, my friend, how could you desert me while I was away?"

"O good King and my beloved friend, how could I ever desert you?" said Hiramon, "In your absence, your queens had planned to kill me, but I knew of their plan and managed to get them to let me out of cage and then I escaped from a water hole and took refuge in the wood-cutter's hut nearby!"

"But Hiramon", asked the King, "why would the queens wish to kill you?"

"Well, it is a long story" said Hiramon, "but I will make it short. The queens are jealous of your love for me and when I told them that the beauty of not a single queen could compare to the little toe of the beautiful princess

who lives across the seven oceans and thirteen rivers, they rushed to strangle me. But luckily, I escaped".

The King was furious with his queens and had them sent away to a distant desert from where they would never return.

After some time, the King took Hiramon out of its cage and put him on his knee and asked: "Hiramon, did you tell the queens that the beauty of none of them could be compared to the little toe of the beautiful princess who lives across the seven oceans and the thirteen rivers?"

"Yes, indeed I did!" said Hiramon.

"Do you know, O wise Hiramon, how we can reach this beautiful princess?" asked the King.

"Of course I do! I can take your Majesty right to her door but you will have to do exactly as I say".

The King agreed. "What we need to do first is to find a Pokhiraj—a winged-horse—that will fly us across the seven oceans and the thirteen rivers and take us right to the door of the palace, where the beautiful princess lives", said Hiramon.

"But where can we find a winged-horse?" asked the astonished King.

"You have many splendid horses in your royal stable", replied Hiramon. "Let us go and see if we can find a Pokhiraj amongst them".

The King and Hiramon quickly went to the stables and looked closely at each horse. Hiramon flew past the finest horses of rarest breed, and then, he stopped by a wretched-looking little pony. "This" cried Hiramon "is the one that we want! For it belongs to that special Pokhiraj breed. But, it must first be fed on the finest grain for six months, before it can undertake the long and difficult journey to the palace of the beautiful princess", said Hiramon.

The King immediately put the pony into a special stable and fed it himself with the finest grain in the kingdom. The pony rapidly grew into a magnificent horse,

with wings whose span was wider than the span of the king-eagle's wing. Hiramon then said that Pokhiraj was now ready for the journey. Hiramon then asked the King to order the royal silversmith to make a thousand silver pebbles, which they would need to take along with them on their journey.

In a short while, the royal silversmith made a bagful of shining silver pebbles and gave them to the King. But before starting on the journey, Hiramon said to the King: "Your Majesty, please listen carefully to what I must tell you. You must whip the Pokhiraj *only once* before starting. If you whip it more than once, it will stop midway, and we will never reach our journey's end. Once we have captured the princess and are returning home, you must again whip Pokhiraj *only once*. Please remember, if you whip him more than once, we shall come only half-way and will never reach your kingdom and your palace.

The King then mounted Pokhiraj, with the bag of silver pebbles, and Hiramon sang a sweet song, as it perched on his shoulder. Then the King gently touched the winged-horse with his whip *only once* and it flashed across the sky like a streak of golden lightning, crossed the seven oceans and the thirteen rivers and alighted at the door of the beautiful princess' palace. Hiramon then asked the King to put the horse in a stable nearby and told him to climb up to the top of a lofty tree, that grew by the palace gate, and hide there amidst its branches.

Hiramon then, carried the silver pebbles in his beak and dropped them, one by one around the tree, through the crystal corridors and across the golden door of the princess' bed-chamber. The princess heard the pebbles drop and opened the door of her chamber and saw the scattered, sparkling silver pebbles. Not knowing what they were, she followed their trail, which led to the tree, where the King and Hiramon were hiding.

That very moment, the King sprang down from the tree, lifted the beautiful princess in his arms and put her on

his horse. Gently, he whipped Pokhiraj *once* and it whirled through the air, like a lightning storm! But alas! the King, eager to reach his palace, got impatient and whipped it once again! With a sudden thud the horse alighted on the edge of a desert and would not move any further.

"What have you done!" exclaimed Hiramon. "Did I not tell you not to whip the horse more than *once*? Pokhraj is now powerless and we will have to stay here till we die!"

The same day, the King of the desert, who was out hunting, had struck an arrow into the heart of a stag and was following its trail, when he saw the princess of matchless beauty, sitting with the King, the horse and the bird on the forsaken desert sands. Charmed by her beauty, he stole the princess and fled with her to his palace, on the brink of an emerald green oasis, in the middle of the desolate desert.

The princess was too shocked to weep and too afraid to speak, but deep in her heart, she knew that wise Hiramon would somehow find and rescue her. Each day, she would lay out a feast of rare grain and delicious seeds on her marble terrace for the birds of the air, hoping that some day Hiramon would fly down with other birds and release her from her solitary life in the desert palace.

Meanwhile, the King and the bird and Pokhiraj were languishing on the desert sands, without food or water or even sleep. One day, the other birds of the desert came to Hiramon and said, "You have a miserable life here without food or water. Why do you not fly with us to a grand feast that is spread out for us on the marble terrace by a princess? We fly there in the morning with a thousand other birds, eat fresh grain and delicious seeds all day long and return to our nests when the sun is setting."

Early next morning, Hiramon flew with the other birds to the marble terrace, where a feast was spread for the birds of the air. There, to his surprise, he saw the beautiful princess who was taken away by the King of the desert.

Thoughtfully Hiramon feasted on fresh grains of golden corn and lotus seeds and waited patiently till all the birds had flown away. Then, he whispered a secret message into the princess's ear and flew back to the King.

That night, when the moon rose high and the stars, like a million twinkling lights, lit up the darkness of the desert sky, Hiramon heard the distant hoot of an owl. He flapped his wings, fluttered and flew into the sky and saw a lone owl perched on top of a sandhill. He bowed low in respect to the great bird and said, "O wisest of wise birds! It is a great honour to meet you tonight. My King and I are lost in the desert and Pokhiraj, our winged-horse, is powerless to fly us back to our kingdom. I am greatly in need of your wise counsel and pray that you will help us in our distress!"

The wise, old owl, looked gravely down at Hiramon and said, "It seems to me that you are indeed, a bird of rare breed and quality and are therefore deserving of my wise advice. There is a secret passage on the fringe of the forest, which you must find. You are clever and small enough to slip through it and it will lead you to the shore of an invisible river, that flows silently beneath the desert sands. Scattered along the shore, you will see a hundred magic Pearls of Wisdom! Pick up a single pearl in you beak and give it to Pokhiraj, who will swallow it with great delight, and when the pearl reaches the centre of his heart, it will be ready for flight".

Hiramon thanked the wise owl and went in search of the secret passage. He flew into the darkness of a hidden cave, through which the invisible river flows and on the shore, he saw a solitary pearl, glowing with lustrous light. He picked it up in his beak and flew back with it to Pokhiraj, who swallowed it with great delight.

At that magic moment, Pokhiraj spread his wondrous wings that now were full of flight and flew with the King and Hiramon to the marble terrace, where the beautiful princess was awaiting them, for Hiramon

had whispered into her ear that he would soon return with the King to fetch her.

Quickly the King alighted from Pokhiraj, carried the beautiful princess in his arms and put her on the horse. Gently, he touched Pokhiraj *only once* and together they flew back to their kingdom across the seven oceans and thirteen rivers, while Hiramon, perched on the King's shoulder, recited a thousand names of Gods and Goddesses and chanted a holy prayer!

And now my story is done,
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On flowers that close their petals.

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The moon from her place of hiding
Over the night comes a-gliding.
Now that the night is deep.
Sleep, my little one, sleep.

Sunshine and Shadows

In the beginning of Time, Gods and Goddesses ruled Heaven and Earth. They lived in "Kailasha", high above the snow-capped mountains, far beyond the cloudless sky. All living beings on Earth loved and worshipped them alike—the king in his palace with all his treasures and the beggar in his hut, with his begging bowl and broken staff.

Many a time, Shani, the God of Misfortune and Lakshmi, the Goddess of Good Fortune, looked down from Kailasha's heavenly heights, to watch the earthly scene of Joy and Sorrow. They smiled to see the mortals laugh and cry and pray, till the last echo of temple bells faded with the fading day.

One day, as they watched the earthly scene of laughter and of tears, Shani turned to Lakshmi and proudly said, "I am more powerful than you, for I see more sorrow than joy on earth!"

But Lakshmi replied, "I am higher in rank than you, because when fortune smiles on mortals, they forget their sorrows and live in joy!"

And thus, they began to quarrel.
The quarrel grew grim and fearful as
Angry words crossed and clashed,
Fiery threats crashed and flashed,
The sky was on fire, the mountains aflame,
And clouds shed tears in sorrow and in shame!

Alarmed, the other Gods and Goddesses in Heaven, prayed and pleaded with Shani and Lakshmi saying, "We pray, O great Shani and gracious Lakshmi, please let us have peace in Heaven! How can there be peace on Earth, when in Heaven there is no peace?"

But Shani and Lakshmi were beyond all pleading and prayer and heedless of Heaven and of Earth.

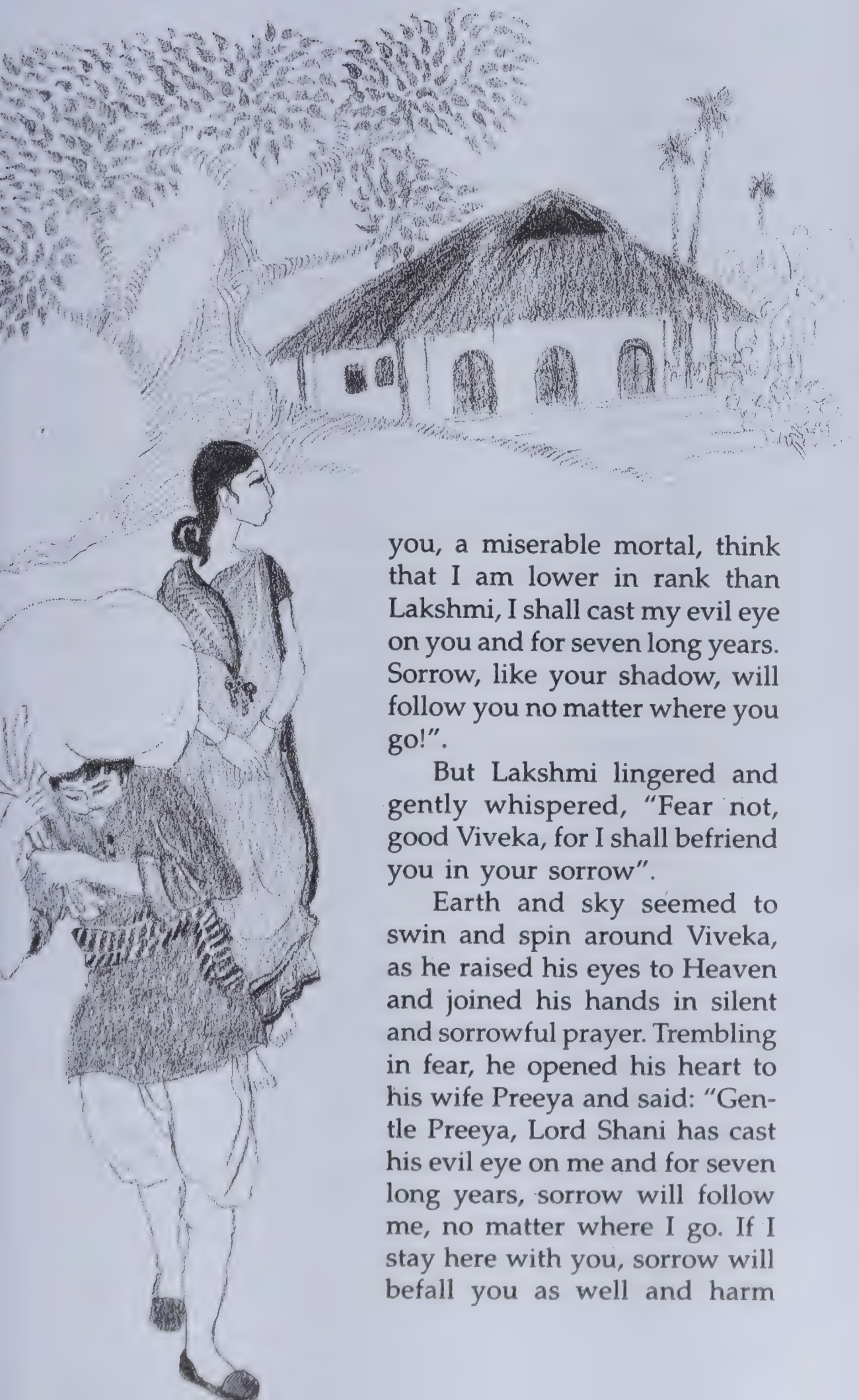
In despair, the Gods and Goddesses decided to take the help of a wise mortal named Viveka, who was renowned for good judgement and wise decision. Like shooting stars, they flashed across flaming mountain and burning sky and down to Earth they came. They blessed Viveka and praised him for his wisdom. Then, they spoke to him about the quarrel in Heaven between Shani and Lakshmi. "Our prayers and pleadings have failed" they said, "and we in Heaven are helpless! We have, therefore, come to urge you, O good Viveka, to settle the quarrel in Heaven with Earthly wisdom and good judgement".

Viveka knew the danger of his task and his heart began to fill with fear for he knew that if he were to side with Shani, Lakshmi would be displeased and forsake him! Should he, on the other hand, choose to side with Lakshmi, then Shani would be enraged and cast his evil eye on him. In either event, he would suffer!

All day and all night, Viveka thought and at last he decided that he would not speak a single word, but let Shani and Lakshmi guess his mind from his actions.

He then ordered two chairs to be made—one of gold and the other of silver, and placed them both beside him. In the silent hour of sunset, Shani and Lakshmi flashed across the flaming sky in chariots of burnished gold. Viveka welcomed them with equal honour and leading Lakshmi to the golden chair, he beckoned Shani to be seated on the silver chair.

The great God Shani's pride was hurt! He raved and ranted and raged and stamped his mighty foot in anger and with a thunderous roar he departed saying: "Since



you, a miserable mortal, think that I am lower in rank than Lakshmi, I shall cast my evil eye on you and for seven long years. Sorrow, like your shadow, will follow you no matter where you go!".

But Lakshmi lingered and gently whispered, "Fear not, good Viveka, for I shall befriend you in your sorrow".

Earth and sky seemed to swin and spin around Viveka, as he raised his eyes to Heaven and joined his hands in silent and sorrowful prayer. Trembling in fear, he opened his heart to his wife Preeya and said: "Gentle Preeya, Lord Shani has cast his evil eye on me and for seven long years, sorrow will follow me, no matter where I go. If I stay here with you, sorrow will befall you as well and harm

will come to our home; but if I leave you and leave our home, I alone will suffer".

"No! No! That cannot be!" said Preeya, "Since I came to your house as a young bride, you have fed me, clothed me and comforted me with love and care! I cannot allow you to suffer alone. Wherever you go, I shall walk beside you and together, we shall share our sorrows".

Tears rolled down Preeya's pale face, as she packed her jewels into her bedding, while Viveka locked the door of their house and together they set out on an aimless journey, praying to Lakshmi for comfort in their grief.

Viveka walked ahead, bearing the bedding on his head and even as Preeya followed, she looked back, to catch a last glimpse of their forsaken home. In sorrow, they walked through fearful forest and unknown land, until they came to a river flowing by. On its silver sands sat a boatman, singing a sweet song of joy and sorrow:

O! Happy am I when the skies are blue,
And birds sing of love so pure and so true,
My heart takes wing, with birds to sing
Of the splendour of sunshine and the sparkle of spring.
My dreams take flight to the land of delight
Where love of the bee for the blossom burns bright.
But the skies grow grey, at the end of a day,
Birds fly away and my dreams go astray.
The butterfly blue and the rose so red,
Droop and die when their beauty is shed.
All things must fade, the wise men say,
For nothing for ever is born to stay!

"Brother boatman!" said Viveka, walking up to him, "Take us across the river in your boat and I shall pay you a golden coin".

"Only one at a time can I take and you are three—you, your wife and the bedding!" replied the boatman.

"Then, take my wife and the bedding first and then return for me".

But the boatman shook his head and replied "First I shall take the bedding, then your wife and last of all yourself!"

Viveka agreed, but alas! before the boat could reach the middle of the stream, there arose from nowhere a sudden storm and the boat, the boatman, the bedding and even the river vanished and Viveka and Preeya stood staring at a stretch of endless, desolate sand. There was not a stir of life anywhere, no bird, no tree, nor even a blade of grass! There was not a sound, save the beat, beat, beat of their throbbing hearts, when all at once, a path of flowers, like a magic carpet, unrolled itself before them and Preeya and Viveka walked along it, singing songs in praise of Lakshmi.

They walked through the sunless day and starless night, not knowing where or when their journey would end, when suddenly, they found themselves in a village of woodcutters, where they built a hut of broken branches and soon fell fast asleep. The next morning when the Chief of the woodcutters clan, saw the strange, new hut, he ran towards it, axe in hand.

"Strangers in our village!" he shouted, "leave our village at once or I shall kill you!"

But, when he looked at Preeya's gentle face and Viveka's noble bearing, he threw down his axe and welcomed them into his clan.

Soon, Viveka learned to cut wood as well as any other woodcutter, but with a difference—whereas the other woodcutters cut common wood, Viveka would cut only precious sandal-wood. No burden bent Viveka's back, as he ran to the market place with a few pieces of scented sandal-wood under his arm and returned home to Preeya with a golden coin. In a short while, the hut of broken branches was transformed into a house made of bricks and timber. Preeya glowed with joy and Viveka was a happy man.

But the woodcutters grew jealous of Viveka's skill and his house of timber and brick. So one night, as he was returning from the market place, they beat him and drove him and Preeya out of the village.

Viveka and Preeya shed tears of sorrow, as they wandered through the lonely night led by the twinkling light of fireflies dancing in the night. But, as the darkness of night brightened with the golden light of day, they found themselves in a village of spinners and weavers.

Now, Preeya was a weaver's daughter and was blessed with skilful fingers. She could spin a thread so delicate and fine, that it looked as though it was spun of air, and for a tiny bundle of air-spun thread, she earned a golden coin. Coin by coin, she saved a hundred coins and strung them into a beautiful necklace, which she wore around her swanlike neck.

When the weaver's wives saw the necklace of golden coins around Preeya's neck, they glared at her with envious eyes as they whispered to one another, "All day long we sit and spin bundles and bundles of thick, strong thread and yet we earn but a silver coin. Preeya spins a few strands of flimsy, wispy thread each day and yet, she wears a long necklace of golden coins around her neck!"

One sunny day, as Preeya walked down to the river with the women of the village, a boatman standing by was charmed by her grace and beauty. Quickly, he put his arm around her slender waist and fled with her in his boat. Preeya cried out aloud and begged for help, but the jealous women turned away and left her to the mercy of the boatman.

Can you imagine Viveka's sorrow, when he heard that Preeya was carried away by a boatman? All day and all through the night he searched the solitary shore, until his legs could carry him no further and he dropped beneath a tree and fell into a deep sleep.

The next morning, warmed by the rays of the sun and soothed by the cool breeze of morning, Viveka saw a

spotted cow standing beside him. She gave him plentiful of milk to drink and just as he was about to leave in search of Preeya, he was struck by the golden glitter of the cow's droppings, for indeed, it was pure gold!

Quickly he gathered the golden droppings, shaped them into bricks and on each brick he engraved his name and the name of the village to which he belonged. Each day, the cow would come and Viveka would gather its golden droppings and make it into bricks. Brick upon brick, he arranged the golden bricks and soon the little mound of golden bricks grew highter and higher and looked like a mountain of glittering gold!

Meanwhile, poor Preeya drooped with sorrow and prayed to Lakshmi to save her from the wicked boatman. In answer to her prayer, her body was covered with ugly sores and her face grew grey and ugly. In disgust, the boatman dragged her down to the bottom of his boat and locked her in with his wares.

From port to port, the boatman journeyed and when all his wares were sold, he sailed back towards his village. Lazily, he drifted along in his boat, when suddenly across the distant shore, he caught a glittering glimpse of a mountain of gold! Eagerly, he rowed his boat towards the deserted shore and when he saw Viveka, he caught him by his neck and threw him into the bottom of his boat, where Preeya was imprisoned.

What joy it was when Viveka's eyes met Preeya's eyes! In silence they greeted one another, as they dared not speak, for fear of the boatman's wrath.

Breathless with greed, the boatman loaded his boat with golden bricks and swiftly sailed away. The journey back was long and the boatman was lonely, so he unlocked the door and called out to Viveka saying, "Come! eat and drink with me and we shall play a game of dice".

Game followed game and Viveka won

every game. The boatman ground his teeth in rage and struck Viveka and hurled him into the swirling waters of the river. The wild wind whipped the waters and dashed and lashed Viveka's body, his breath grew weak, his courage failed and he was swept away by the treacherous waters of the river.

The next day, an old woman who was gathering wood on a forsaken shore, saw a man lying naked and almost lifeless on the sands. She carried him to her hut, lit a fire to warm his frozen body and gave him hot milk to drink.

Viveka soon revived and as he opened his eyes, he saw a pair of kind, old eyes looking down at him with motherly care. A shadow of sadness fell across her face as Viveka told him the sad story of his life. Without speaking a word, she went into her garden, plucked the choicest flowers and ran with them to the king's palace.

The King who loved flowers was overjoyed and asked, "Where did you find these rare blossoms? Ask any price you wish and it shall be given to you!"

"Good King, I want neither gold nor silver but have come to ask you for a favour. A man of wisdom and noble bearing has come to my hut. He has lost his wife, and is penniless and far from home. I beg you to employ him in your service", replied the old woman, going down on her knees, with folded hands. The King immediately called for Viveka and employed him to collect toll from every single boat that crossed the river.

In the days that followed, Viveka kept faithful watch over the river and not a single boat could cross its waters, without paying the rightful toll. But, at the end of the day, as the sun touched the edge of the river, his thoughts strayed in search of Preeya.

One night, he lay alone by the river, listening to the whisper of ripples across the water and the sound of the river slipping by. He listened to the sudden stir of fish and frog in the sleeping waters and watched the moonbeams

glimmer and dance across the shadow of the moon. When all of a sudden, he heard a sound of groaning, creaking wood. He sprang to his feet and swinging his lamp, paced the lonely shore. A moving shadow floated across the river and soon, he could dimly see a boat.

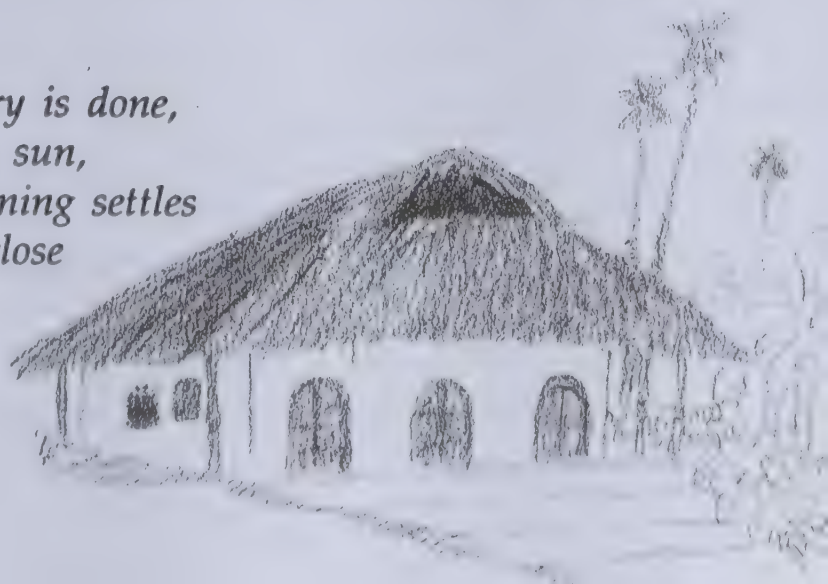
"Halt!" shouted Viveka, shattering the silence of the night "Who goes there!" The palace guards ran out, their torches lit and swords drawn, as Viveka stopped the boat and cried out aloud, "Take him prisoner, for he has stolen my wife and my golden bricks". Holding his breath, Viveka ran to the boat, broke open the lock and as he carried Preeya out, her ugly sores vanished and she was once again as beautiful as a new-born blossom.

Meanwhile, the palace guards took the boatman prisoner and when they searched his boat, they found it laden with golden bricks and on each brick was engraved Viveka's name and the name of the village to which he belonged.

In the moment of joy, Viveka and Preeya forgot their sorrows, for at last the seven years of sorrow had come to an end and they were no longer under Shani's curse! Hand in hand they ran to the King's palace and then to the old woman's hut, to thank them for their help and kindness, and sailed happily back to their village in the boatman's boat, laden with golden bricks.

Thus it was proved that Shani and Lakshmi are equal in rank and power and the quarrel in heaven was settled. For, the darkness of Sorrow fades and awakens to the light of new-born Joy.

And now my story is done,
Red is the setting sun,
The silence of evening settles
On flowers that close
their petals.



Evening shadows are creeping,
Birds on their branches are sleeping.
Stars appear in the skies,
Like slowly-opening eyes.

The moon from her place of hiding,
Over the night comes a-gliding.
Now that the night is deep,
Sleep, my little one, sleep.

Dalim Kumar, The Pomegranate Prince

In days of old, there was once a King, who had two wives, but both were childless and the King greatly desired to have a son, who would inherit his vast kingdom and his crown, after he was dead.

Each Queen lived in a separate palace of her own, with a hundred companions who sang and danced and told them stories to keep them amused and they had countless servants to serve them by day and by night. Tall, tree-laced walls were built around the palace, so no common man could look in nor enter the palace gates.

Somehow, one day, a tattered old beggar found his way into the younger Queen's palace and asked for a bowlful of rice, but her companions drove him away, saying they did not have a single grain of rice to give him.

Hungry and weary, the beggar went to the older Queen's palace to ask for food. The Queen herself came out and gave him food and drink and asked him to rest under a flowering tree in her palace garden. After he had eaten and rested, he thanked and blessed the Queen and as he was leaving he asked: "Good Queen! how many children do you have?"

"I do not have a single child", she sorrowfully replied.

He then gave her a magic berry, wrapped neatly in a leaf and said, "Crush the berry, mix it with the juice of pomegranate flowers and drink the juice to a prayer. After nine moons, you will be blessed with a boy of uncommon beauty, with a skin like the colour of a pomegranate flower and you will name him "Dalim Kumar". Enemies will try

to take away the life of your child, but I will tell you a secret, which you must not disclose to anybody—not even to the King. The life of your child will lie in the heart of a silver fish, that lives under the water, in a palace pond. In the centre of its heart is a tiny, golden box and inside the box, is a golden chain, which holds the life of your son".

The beggar had hardly gone, when news went around the palace that the older Queen had hopes of having a child. When the King heard about it, he was overjoyed. He went to his treasure house, picked out the most precious jewels he possessed and gave them to the queen.

In the fullness of time, just as the beggar had foretold, a boy of rare beauty, with skin, the colour of the pomegranate flower, was born to the Queen and he was named "Dalim Kumar". Great was the King's joy, as he held the new-born prince in his arms and prayed for the day when he would be King and inherit his vast kingdom and wear his jewelled crown. A grand celebration was ordered throughout the kingdom and the palace gates were thrown open to rich and poor alike, so they could come in and see the little prince and give him their blessings.

As time went by, Dalim Kumar grew into a fine and playful boy. He had many friends to play with, but more than anything else, he loved to play with the many-coloured pigeons in the palace garden. He would tie secret messages around their tiny necks and make them fly to his friends, while he watched and waited for them to return with a reply. But, sometimes his pigeons would fly into the younger Queen's garden and Dalim Kumar would chase after them, to bring them back to his own palace.

One day Dalim Kumar's favourite white pigeon flew in to the younger Queen's palace. He ran to catch it, but the Queen's companions had already caught it and imprisoned it in a cage. Dalim Kumar pleaded with the Queen to return his

pigeon and she gave it back to him, but with a warning that the next time the pigeon flew into her garden, she would have it killed and thrown to the crows to feast upon. Dalim Kumar thanked and embraced the Queen and promised faithfully that it would never happen again.

Now, Dalim Kumar loved the younger Queen as much as he loved his own mother, but the Queen hated him. From the day he was born, the King loved only him and his mother and the younger Queen felt unloved and forlorn. Besides, she had heard from one of her companions, who was a spy, that the beggar who was refused food in her palace, had gone to the older Queen's palace where he was fed and in return, the beggar had given the Queen a magic berry wrapped in a leaf and told her she would have a child, and that the little child's life would lie somewhere outside his body, but of course, she had not heard exactly where it was hidden.

Alas! once again, another day, Dalim Kumar's pigeon flew into the Queen's palace but this time, the Queen refused to give it back to him. "I will not return the pigeon to you, unless you tell me one thing" said the Queen with a smile.

"What thing, Mother?" asked the little prince innocently.

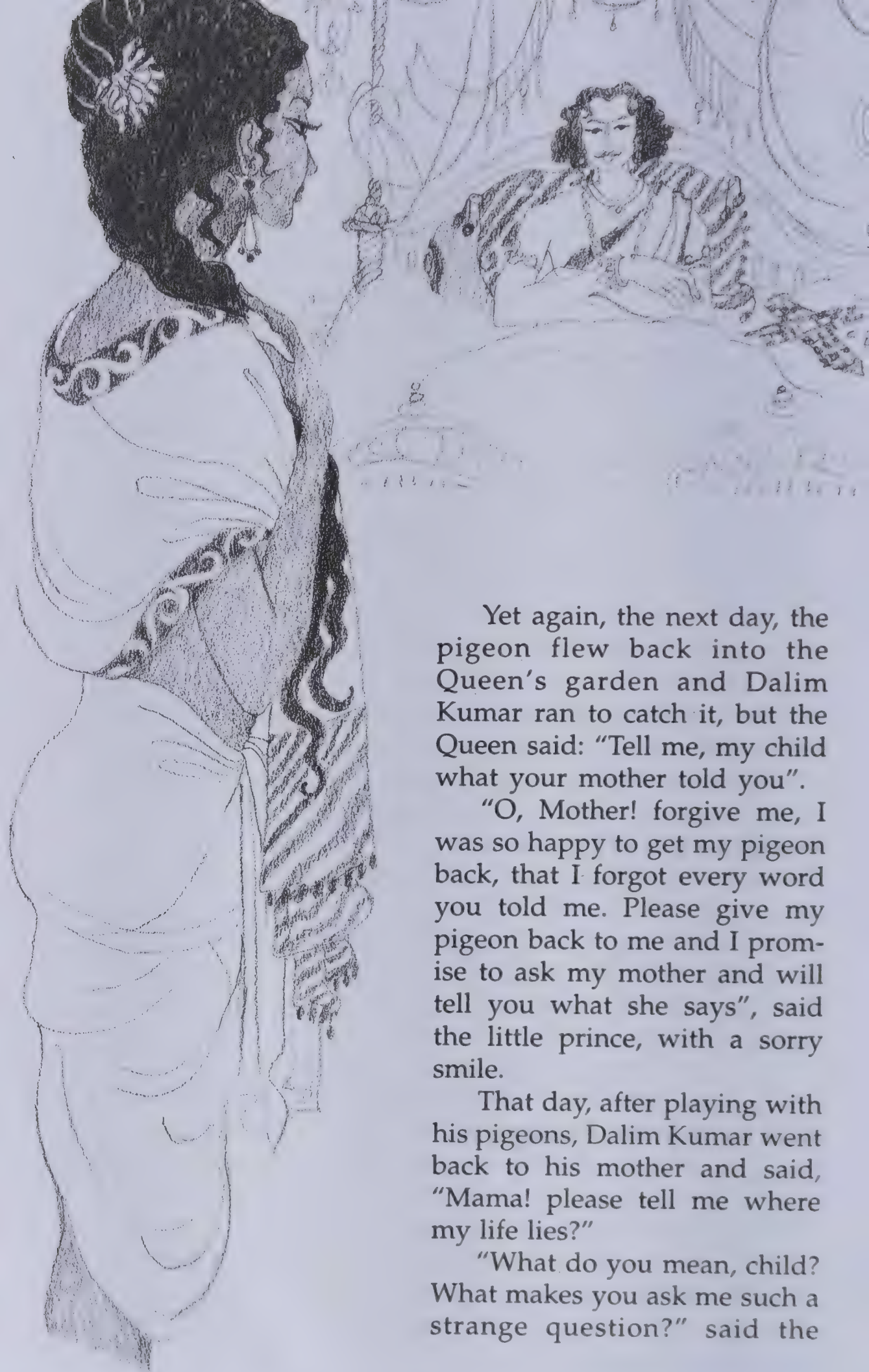
"Nothing particular, my child! I only want to know where your life lies" said the Queen.

"Where elese could my life lie, except within my heart, Mother!" exclaimed the boy, in surprise.

"Sweet child!, perhaps you do not know, but your Mother surely knows" said the Queen.

"But Mother, I have never heard of any such thing!" said Dalim Kumar, as his eyes brimmed with tears.

"If you promise to ask your mother and tell me what she says, I will return your pigeon to you. But, you must also promise not to tell her that I have asked you", said the Queen. The little boy promised and happily ran back to his palace with his pigeon.



Yet again, the next day, the pigeon flew back into the Queen's garden and Dalim Kumar ran to catch it, but the Queen said: "Tell me, my child what your mother told you".

"O, Mother! forgive me, I was so happy to get my pigeon back, that I forgot every word you told me. Please give my pigeon back to me and I promise to ask my mother and will tell you what she says", said the little prince, with a sorry smile.

That day, after playing with his pigeons, Dalim Kumar went back to his mother and said, "Mama! please tell me where my life lies?"

"What do you mean, child? What makes you ask me such a strange question?" said the

Queen, with horror in her eyes.

"Mama, I have heard that you know the secret of my life. Please Mama, tell me where my life is hidden", said Dalim Kumar, looking at her with imploring eyes.

The Queen was shocked and could hardly speak, as she could not fathom how the boy had come to know, for she had kept it a secret, even from the King. At first, she refused to answer his question, but Dalim Kumar wept and would not eat or drink until she told him and in a moment of weakness, she told him what nobody else but she alone knew—the secret of his life.

The same day, Dalim Kumar went to the younger Queen's palace and told her what his mother had told him. No sooner had the Queen heard the secret than she was determined to destroy the little prince. She immediately sent a message to the King to say she was very ill and that her physician had told her that the only remedy for her ailment was for her to eat the heart of the silver fish that lived under the water, in the palace pond. The King immediately sent for the palace fisherman and at the first throw of his net, the silver fish was caught and sent to the Queen.

The moment the fish was caught, Dalim Kumar felt unwell and when it was cut, he fell down and lay lifeless like a corpse. When the sad news reached the older Queen's ears, she swooned with sorrow, but the King refused to believe that his beloved son was really dead so he ordered that his body be taken to his summer palace, where it was laid in state. Every possible provision was made for the prince as though he was still alive and nobody was allowed to enter the palace, except Dalim Kumar's best friend, Nanda, who was entrusted with the key.

Meanwhile, the younger Queen had opened the golden box and found the golden chain, which she quickly put around her neck. All day she wore the chain around her neck, but at night, she took it off and hid it under her

pillow, so nobody could steal it.

That very night, Dalim Kumar's friend, Nanda, went to the summer palace and as he opened the door, he saw a white shadow moving across the guilded hall. At first, he was alarmed, for he thought it was a ghost! But, when he came closer, to his surprise, he found that was no ghost at all, but Dalim Kumar himself in life and blood!

"Dalim Kumar! are you really alive or do I see a ghost? Tell me, as I am confused and afraid!" said Nanda.

"Nanda! all day I lay dead, but as the day darkened into night, I have come back to life! I am confused myself and do not know whether I am dead or alive!"

Night after night, Nanda went to the summer palace and Dalim Kumar was awake and alive to welcome him. They ate and drank and played together but neither of them could understand the strange mystery of Dalim Kumar's life.

One night, while Dalim Kumar and Nanda were playing a game of dice, they heard a gentle knock at the door. Nanda sprang up and opened the door and a young girl of exquisite beauty stepped in.

"Beautiful stranger! Who are you and what brings you here on this cold and wintry night?" asked Dalim Kumar.

"My name is Naina. I am the daughter of a renowned astrologer and he has prophesied that it is written on my forehead, that I will be married to a dead prince! Now that I have come of age, I have run away from my house and my village, to escape from the sad fate that awaits me!" said the girl with tears in her eyes.

"Nobody can escape from their destined fate!" exclaimed Dalim Kumar. "I am the dead prince and you will be my bride!".

Astonished, the young girl said: "But you are alive and speaking to me! How could you be the dead prince that I will marry?"

"Come in, and I will tell you my sad story, only then,

you will understand!" replied the prince, as he led her into the palace.

All night Dalim Kumar talked and she listened to him with understanding silence. But, with the first ray of morning light, the prince fell into a deathlike sleep and lay cold and lifeless, like a marble statue. Afraid and alone, Naina wept through the day but at nightfall, Dalim Kumar came to life again and they talked and ate together, until the night brightened into day. Thus, they lived together, alternating between life and death, for seven years and during that time, two beautiful boys were born to Naina, who looked like the image of their father.

For seven long years, Naina had lived patiently through the alternating pattern of Dalim Kumar's life but now she was weary and worried for the future of her two little boys. So, one day, when Nanda came to visit them, she confided in him and said, "Brother Nanda! how long can we continue to live with the changing pattern of Dalim Kumar's life! Is there no solution to this mysterious problem?"

"I know how distressed you must feel, sister Naina" replied Nanda, "I have thought long and deeply about the mysterious problem and I think I know how we can end this unending sorrow. But, you will have to do what I tell you. Disguise yourself as a woman barber and go with the boys to the palace and offer your services to both the Queens and then we shall see what happens!"

Dalim Kumar had told Naina that his Mother had told him the secret of his life and that his life was hidden in a golden chain that lay in the heart of a silver fish. After deep thought, Nanda had come to the conclusion that perhaps, the younger Queen wore the golden chain all day and took it off at night and that was the reason why Dalim Kumar lay dead all day while the younger Queen wore the necklace, and came to life when she took it off at night.

The next day, Nanda gave Naina a box of instruments that women barbers carry and Naina, disguised as a

barber, went with the two boys to the palace. At first she went to the older Queen and offered to wash her hair and paint her feet. But, when the Queen saw the two little boys, she broke into tears because they looked exactly like Dalim Kumar when he was young. Wiping her tears, she told Naina that since her beloved son had died, she had give up all womanly vanity and lived the life of a hermit, even though she lived in the palace. The Queen then kissed and caressed the little boys, gave them money and

food and wished them farewell.

Naina then went to the younger Queen's palace and offered to wash her hair and paint her feet. But, while Naina was washing the Queen's feet, the little boy, attracted by the sparkle of the Queen's golden chain, snatched it from her neck! Naina tried to take it away from his little hands, but he cried and screamed till he was breathless, but would not give it back. The Queen felt sorry for the lovely little child and said: "Do not let the child cry anymore, for he may choke! Let him take the golden chain home with him and when he falls asleep, bring it back to me". The Queen, of course, was sure that Dalim Kumar was long-dead and she had nothing to fear any more.

Heaven and earth seemed to smile on Naina as she ran back with the children and the golden chain.

At that magic moment, Dalim Kumar's eyes were lit open by the brilliant light of sunshine! Like a blind man, whose sight has suddenly been restored, he sat up and looked around with glazed eyes. Just then, Naina came running up to him and put the golden chain around his neck and told him how the little boy had pulled the necklace off the younger Queen's neck.

In unexpected joy, Dalim Kumar embraced his wife and kissed the children and said, "The nights of wakefulness have brought us closer to the moon and the stars! Now we can enjoy the splendour of day and the beauty of night, without sorrow and fear!"

In the meantime, the beggar returned to the older Queen's palace and said, "Mother Queen! Dalim Kumar was never really dead and is still alive! Go to the summer palace with the King and bring back Dalim Kumar, his wife and children, to your kingdom and to your people!"

But, the younger Queen's spy had seen the beggar entering the older Queen's palace. She hid behind a tree and listened to what the beggar had whispered to the Queen and hurried back to tell the younger Queen what she had heard. The Queen shook with fear, for she knew

that her evil actions could no longer be kept a secret and she would have to suffer for her evil deeds. Mad with anger and fear, she ran to the palace pond and drowned herself, and her evil body was devoured by the hungry fish.

The next enchanted day, invisible magic fingers painted the sky with seven colours of the rainbow and the dew of dawn mingled with the fragrance of flowers and spread through the mystic air! Spellbound, the people of the kingdom crowded around the palace gates to welcome the King and Queen as they returned with their beloved prince, Dalim Kumar, his beautiful wife, and their two little boys, to their kingdom and their people.

And now my story is done,
Red is the setting sun,
The silence of evening settles
On flowers that close their petals.

Evening shadows are creeping,
Birds on their branches are sleeping.
Stars appears in the skies,
Like slowly-opening eyes.

The moon from her place of hiding,
Over the night comes a-gliding.
Now that the night is deep,
Sleep, my little one, sleep.

The Boy With the Moon on His Forehead

Once upon a time, in a royal city, there lived a poor old woman who picked rags and scraps from the village and the fields, for that was the only means of keeping herself alive and free from hunger.

This poor woman had a daughter of exquisite beauty. On her gentle face, one could see subtle shades of happiness and misery, joy and pain, laughter and tears. But heaven had willed that she should live in poverty and hunger. Her beauty enchanted every passer-by, whether he be the king, who buys beauty with his gold, or the humble potter, who moulds the clay with loving fingrs to give it form and beauty.

Her unsurpassed beauty won her the friendship of three young girls far above her in rank and status. One was the daughter of the prime minister, the second, the daughter of a wealthy merchant and the third, the daughter of the royal priest.

One day, the three young friends, together with the daughter of the poor woman, were bathing in a lake not far from the palace. As they rejoiced in the cooling waters of the lake, each one spoke of the talents they were blessed with.

"Listen friends", said the prime minister's daughter, "The man who marries me will be a happy man. He will never need to buy me clothes, for the clothes I wear will never get soiled, never get old and will never tear!"

The merchant's daughter said: "The man who marries me will also be a happy man, because the fuel I use for

cooking, will never burn to ashes and can be used day after day, year in and year out!".

"My husband will also be a fortunate man", said the royal priest's daughter, "for the rice I cook will never get stale, will never finish and even after we have eaten, the pot will always be full!"

Lastly, the daughter of the poor woman said, "The man who marries me will be a blessed man, for I shall give birth to twins—a daughter and a son. The daughter will be divinely beautiful and the son will have a moon on his forehead and stars on the palms of his hands!"

They had hardly begun to speak, when the King rode by on his magnificent white steed and heard what the girls were saying. "I don't care a straw for the girl whose clothes never get soiled, never get old and never tear", thought the King, "for I can give my wife countless garments spun with thread of gold and spangled with gems, that would be the envy of every maiden in the land. Neither would I care for the girl whose fuel never gets consumed, becaused in the royal kitchen, there is enough fuel to set the whole world on fire! Nor would I care for the third maiden, whose pot of rice is always full, for the royal granary has enough rice to feed all the kings and kingdoms of the world!. But the fourth maiden, whose beauty far surpasses the beauty of all the Goddesses in heaven, and who will give birth to a divinely beautiful girl and a boy with a moon on his forehead and stars on the palms of his hands, is the girl that I want and I will marry her.

Now the King had four wives, but not a single child was born to any one of them. His ministers were greatly troubled, for a king without an heir is like the sun without fire and light. So they entreated him to marry a fifth wife, who, with luck, would bless him with an heir to his vast kingdom and his golden throne.

The King, having set his heart on the old woman's beautiful daughter, sent out his men to enquire about her family and where she belonged. But they returned to tell

him that, much to their regret, the beautiful maiden was of lowly birth—the daughter of a poor old rag-picker.

"How can a king marry a girl so low in rank and unequal to his royal stature?" said the outraged Prime Minister.

"No matter!" said the King. "It is her and only her I wish to marry".

That very day, the King sent for the old woman and when she saw the messenger of the King standing outside her hut, she trembled with fear, for she thought the King had sent for her to punish her for trespassing into the palace grounds. Shaking with fear, she followed the King's messenger, who led her to the King's private chamber.

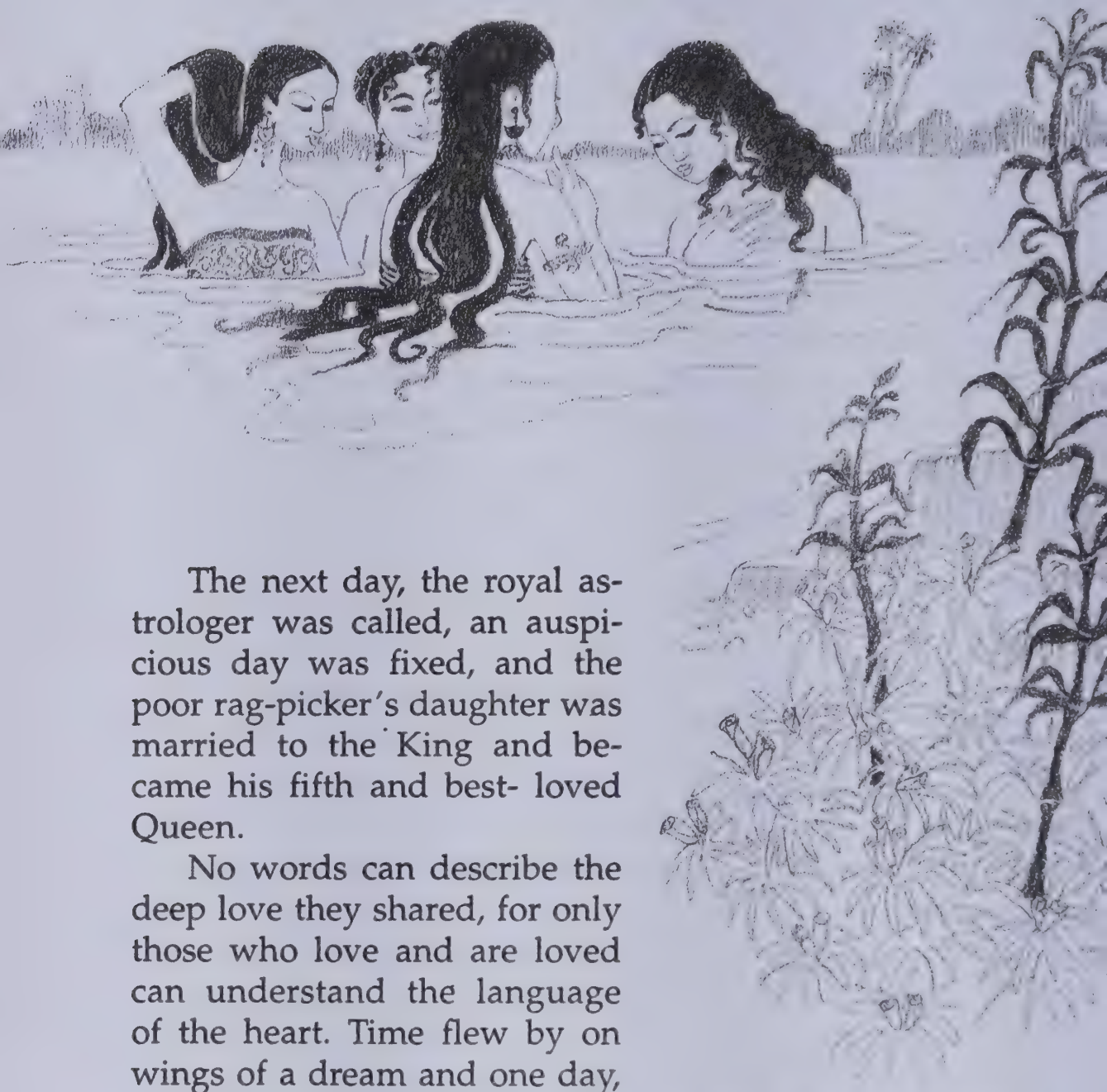
"Is it true that you have a daughter, whose beauty far surpasses the beauty of the Goddess of Love and Beauty and that she is the friend of my prime minister's daughter and the palace priest's daughter?" the King asked.

The poor old woman's body trembled, her lips quivered and her heart grew faint, as she fell to the King's feet to beg for mercy.

"Good woman", said the King as he bent down to raise her from the floor, "I wish to marry your daughter and make her my Queen!"

Benumbed, the poor old woman gazed at the King with disbelieving eyes and could not speak for want of words. But the King spoke to her with kind words and calmed her ruffled heart, "Cast aside your fear and sorrow, for I shall marry your daughter and she shall be my Queen!"

Soon it was known throughout the kingdom that the King was to marry a girl of lowly birth, but of heavenly beauty. When the four Queens heard about it, they gasped with horror. "What madness has possessed you, O good King, that you want to marry a girl, who is not even fit to be our maid-servant and you expect us to treat her as our equal?" said the oldest Queen in anger. But the King remained unshaken.



The next day, the royal astrologer was called, an auspicious day was fixed, and the poor rag-picker's daughter was married to the King and became his fifth and best- loved Queen.

No words can describe the deep love they shared, for only those who love and are loved can understand the language of the heart. Time flew by on wings of a dream and one day, the King called for the Queen and said, "Beloved one! I must leave you for a while, to do my duty as a King and visit the other parts of my great kingdom. You are with child and I would like to be with you at the time when our child is born, for the intrigues of a palace are beyond your simple understanding. I give you this golden bell and when the child is about to be born, just ring the bell once and I shall be beside you in a flicker of an eye- wink. But, remember to ring the bell *only* when the child is about to be born and *not* a moment earlier.

Soon after the King had departed, the four other Queens who had overheard what the King had told the young Queen, came into her chamber.

"Where did you get this beautiful bell and why have you hung it up beside your bed?" asked the oldest Queen.

"It was given to me by the King and he has told me that I should ring it only when our child is about to be born and no matter where he may be when he hears the bell, he will be beside me in the twinkling of an eye", replied the innocent young Queen.

"Impossible!" said the other Queen. "The King must have been joking!. How can the bell be heard from the distance of hundreds of miles and how can he be with you in a twinkle of an eye-wink? Ring the bell just now and you will soon find out whether what the King told you is true".

At first, the young Queen was unwilling to ring the bell, but the other Queens entreated her to do so and being young and simple at heart, she gently rang the bell. At that moment, the King was half-way to the capital of his other dominion, but no sooner did he hear the bell, he turned back and in a few moments, he arrived at the Queen's apartments. Astonished to find the Queen talking happily to her companion, the King asked, "Did I not tell you to ring the bell at the time of childbirth and not a moment earlier?"

"Yes, you did my Lord. I rang the bell to make sure that what you said is true". But she did not tell him that the older Queens had urged her to do so.

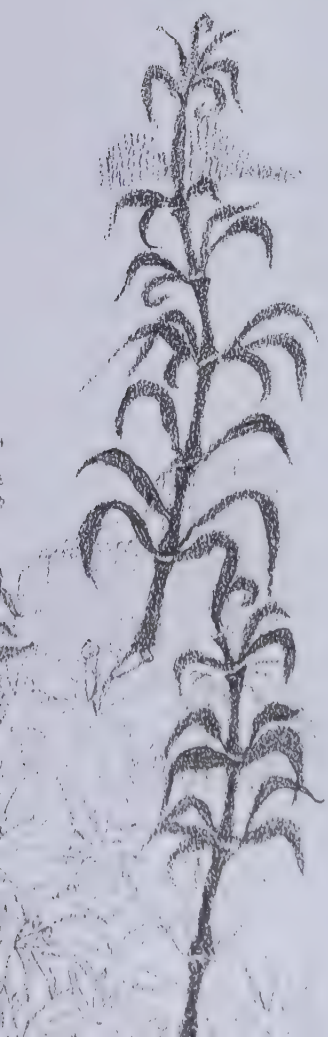
"How could you doubt my word, beloved Queen? Are you not sure of the depth of my love?" replied the King, looking grieved. But, when he saw teardrops flowing down her beautiful face, he wiped her tears with his scarf, embraced her and said, "Now that you know that what I said is true, remember not to ring the bell again until our child is about to be born".

Time went slowly by for the young Queen without the

King. And once again, on a stormy night, the four older Queens visited her in her chamber. "The time for the birth of your child is drawing near!" said the oldest Queen. "When you last rang the bell, the sound travelled to the King, because he had not gone far from the palace and the air was clear. These are days of rain and storm and I fear that the sound of the bell may not reach the King's ears. Ring the bell once more, just to make sure that the sound of the bell reaches the King, so he can be without when his long-awaited child is born."

For a long while, the young Queen resisted, but the other Queens persisted and in a moment of weakness, she rang the bell. The King was in his capital, giving justice in his court, when he heard the ring of the golden bell. He immediately closed down the Court and in an instant, he was standing beside the Queen, in her chamber.

This time, the King was angry, and his voice shook with rage, as he said: "Once again, you have doubted my word and my love for you! But now, I shall leave you to your fate! When you ring the bell and really need me, I shall not return—no matter how often and how loudly you ring".



Never had the King spoken to his beloved Queen with angry words! Shocked to tears, she said, "Forgive me, my Lord! I am now near to childbirth and wished to be sure that the sound of the bell would reach you across the great distance that lies between us!" But once again, she did not tell the King that the older Queens had urged her to ring the bell and the King left without a word.

At last, the auspicious moment arrived!. Again and again, the young Queen rang the golden bell. Louder and louder became the call, till its golden echo rang throughout the kingdom and beyond the forest. But alas! the King did not arrive.

The older Queens now knew that the King would not return, so they called the royal nurse and gave her a bag of golden coins and asked her to do away with the new born infants, and replace them with a pair of newly born pups that were born to the King's personal dog.

Soon, the young Queen gave birth to a twin—a beautiful girl and a boy with a tiny moon on his forehead and stars on the palms of his hands. But to the Queen's sorrow, the nurse presented her with a pair of new born pups and told her that they were born to her!

The next day, even though the King was annoyed with the Queen, he arrived, for he remembered that she was destined to give birth to twins—a beautiful girl and a boy with a moon on his forehead and stars on the palm of his hands. But to his horror, two little pups were presented to him and he was told that they were born to the Queen.

Can you imagine the King's sorrow and shame? Enraged, he ordered that the young Queen should be stripped of her fine robes and jewels and employed in the market to drive away the crows. Meanwhile, in the dead of night, the palace nurse put the new-born twins into a basket, covered it with straw and left it at the door of a potter's hut outside the village.

Before the break of dawn, the potter's wife was aroused from sleep by the tender cry of a new-born infant. Without a thought, she ran out of the hut and found to her surprise, two beautiful new-born infants, huddled together in a basket, outside the door. She gazed at them with love and wonder, as she carried them tenderly into her hut and awoke the pottter. "We have no children of our own, but the Gods have sent us a beautiful girl and a boy, with a moon on is forehead and stars on the palms of his hands!" she cried.

Every moment was full of joy for the potter and his wife and with every passing day, the little girl grew more beautiful and the little moon on the boy's forehead glowed bright. Soon, the twins grew up and were the

pride and joy of the potter's heart and the envy of the village. The potter's wife sat up all night, to stitch many coloured dresses for the little girl and made a turban of rainbow colours for the boy, to protect and hide his moonlit forehead from the envious eyes of the people of the village.

Time went by and the girl and the boy learned to mould the clay into patterns of exquisite form and beauty and mastered the delicate art of the potter's wheel and people came from far and from near to buy their beautiful wares. But the potter and his wife grew old and feeble and one by one, they both died.

The brother and sister worked harder and harder, and coin by coin, they collected a thousand coins, to buy a little house for themselves in the village. And the boy, who loved to ramble in the forest, bought himself a horse, a bow and arrows, and would often go hunting, when the day's work was done.

At the time of the Festival of Lights, there was great excitement in the village and crowds of people flocked to the market place to buy beautiful lamps to light up their houses and welcome Lakshmi, the Goddess of Good Fortune into their homes and pray for peace and joy. On the day of the feast, a million lamps glittered and shone in every home, every street and every corner, and the village was transformed into a land of fairy dreams and magical wonder.

That day, a lone woman, clad in a ragged robe, came to the young maiden's shop and asked her for a single lamp. "One single lamp!" exclaimed the girl. "You need a hundred lamps to light up your house on a festive day as this, so that the Goddess Lakshmi graces your home and gives you her best blessings!"

"I have neither house nor home!" sighed the lone woman, "but I will light a lamp at the foot of the grand old tree that gives me shelter from sun and rain".

The girl looked up and saw a ray of sorrow shining

through the beautiful black eyes of the woman. "You sadden my heart!" said the girl, "My brother and I live alone in a house nearby. We have lost our father and mother and feel forlorn. Will you come to live with us in our home?" she said. The lone woman clutched her heart and wiped her tears, as she followed the girl into her home.

It was as though the Goddess Lakshmi had come to their home and filled it with love and light! No longer did the boy and girl feel alone, for a mystic bond bound them to one another, like the love between mother and child.

The next morning, the village slumbered, for everybody had stayed awake through the night, to pray to Goddess Lakshmi for good fortune and joy throughout the coming year. But the boy with the moon on his forehead, wore his rainbow-coloured turban, mounted his horse and rode into the forest.

He lay by a singing brook, beneath a willow tree that bowed down to kiss and caress the crystal waters. He closed his eyes and opened his heart, to discover the secrets of the silent forest. He breathed in the fragrance of flowers and listened to the gentle whisper of morning breeze and felt that all the beauty and silence of the forest was in his heart. Soon, he fell into a sublime slumber.

Of a sudden, he was aroused from blissful dreams by a whistling sound of a flying arrow, that shot through the air, pierced through his turban and tore it apart. Startled, he opened his eyes and saw a strange, tall man staring intensely at the glow of the moon shining on his forehead.

"Who are you who has shot an arrow into the air and shattered the turban that binds my brow?", exclaimed the boy in anger.

"I am the King of the land! And, who are you? Where do you belong and to which mother were you born?" said the King.

The boy rose to his feet, looked sadly at his shattered

turban and said, "I am a potter's son and I live with my twin sister and adopted mother in a house by the market place".

"Lead me to your house!" commanded the King.

In thoughtful silence, the King and the boy rode through the forest and across the village, to a house in the market place. A beautiful maiden stood at the door and when she saw a strange man standing outside her door with her brother, she called out to her mother.

A mystic magic filled the air as the Queen's eyes met the King's eyes! She let out a sigh that came from the depth of her heart and mingled with her tears. In spellbound silence they stood, the royal King, the Queen, the beautiful girl and the boy with a moon on his forehead, when the royal nurse who had seen the King approaching the house, came running across the threshold, to fall at the King's feet and confess her guilt. She told them the truth about the ringing of the golden bell, about the four Queens who had given her a bag of gold to destroy the royal infants and how, in the kindness of her heart, she had put the royal twins into a basket and left them outside a potter's hut.

"How mysterious are the ways of the world and stranger still, the play of Life and Love!. But truth never fails and love never dies!" said the King, as he embraced the royal twins and kissed the Queen's hand and together they rode back to their kingdom to live for ever in peace and happiness.

And now my story is done,
Red is the setting sun,
The silence of evening settles,
On flowers that close their petals.

Evening shadows are creeping,
Birds on their branches are sleeping,
Stars appear in the skies,

Like slowly opening eyes.

The moon from her place of hiding
Over the night comes a-gliding.
Now that the night is deep
Sleep, my little one, sleep.

The Sword of Justice

The city of the Sun glittered with jewelled palaces and magnificent temple towers that rose high to reach the sunlit clouds. Its streets were paved with bricks of gold and its walls were spangled with brilliant diamonds that sparkled like a million stars to light up the darkness of the night.

The King and his subjects worshipped Surya, the Sun God, for without the life-giving rays of the sun, there would neither be life on earth nor light in heaven.

The King had three sons and a million subjects, who looked up to him as the preserver of their lives and the protector of their wordly wealth. One day, all his subjects came to him and said: "Your Majesty, perhaps you do not know that your great kingdom is infested with robbers and thieves, and though we are rich, our lives and our wealth are not safe! We implore you to have the thieves and robbers caught and punished, so that we can live in safety".

The King listened to them in silence, but after they left, he called for his sons and said, "How is it that my kingdom is infested with thieves and robbers, when I have three young and strong sons to protect my kingdom and my people? I am old and can no longer fight the thieves and robbers, but I expect you to catch the robbers and thieves and punish them, because they are doing great harm to my kingdom and to my people!" The three princes were determined to guard the kingdom and its people, so they set up a guard-house on the outskirts of the city and lived

there with their horses.

In the early part of night, the oldest prince mounted his horse and rode through the city, but he did not see nor hear of a single robber or thief, so he returned to the guard-house and fell asleep. Around midnight, the second prince got onto his horse and rode through every street and every corner of the city, but he too returned to the guard-house without having either seen or heard of a single robber or thief and soon he too, fell asleep. Some hours after midnight, the youngest prince went on his rounds and as he approached the palace, much to his astonishment, he saw a woman of heavenly beauty, coming out of the palace gate.

"Who are you and what brings you to the King's palace at this late hour of night?" asked the prince.

"I am Rajalakshmi, the guardian-angel of the palace. The King is going to be killed tonight and I am no longer needed, so I am leaving the palace."

"Rajalakshmi, O Beautiful Angel, please stay and protect the palace and I promise that I shall prevent the King from being killed tonight!" implored the prince.

"I promise to return, but only if the King is not killed tonight! But now, I cannot stay" replied Rajalakshmi, as she vanished into the night.

The prince immediately entered the King's chamber, where the King lay asleep on a golden bed and his second queen slept beside him, but on a separate bed. A candle burned dimly in the room and in its fading light, the prince saw an enormous serpent circling around the King's bed. Alarmed, he drew his sword, killed the snake and cut its writhing body into a hundred pieces to make sure it was really dead and put the pieces on a golden platter beside the King's bed. But, when he killed the snake, a drop of its blood fell onto the Queen's hand and the prince gently wiped it off with his silken scarf.

Just as he was leaving, the Queen moved her head on her silken cushion, opened her eyes and saw the prince

going out of the chamber.

"My Lord! my Lord", she cried "wake up! Your youngest son, of whom you speak so highly, stole into our chamber at night and kissed my hand, and as he was leaving. I saw him! He is no worthy son, who steals into his father's chamber and kisses his step-mother's hand!"

The next morning, the King called for his eldest son and asked, "If a man to whom I entrust my honour and my life proves faithless, how should he be punished?"

"Undoubtedly, such a man should have his head cut off! But before you punish him", said the prince, "make sure he is really guilty".

"What do you mean? Is he not guilty of betraying my faith?" replied the King.

"If Your Majesty is pleased to listen, I will tell you a story that will explain what I mean:

"Once upon a time, there was a goldsmith, who had a beautiful wife. Not only was she beautiful, but she was blessed with the gift of understanding the language of the birds and of the beasts, but neither the father nor the son knew about her uncommon talent.

One night, as she lay beside her husband in their home,

which was near a river, she heard a jackal howl: "There goes a dead body, floating on the river! Is there anybody who will take the diamond ring from the dead man's finger and throw his body to me, so I can eat it?"

The woman, who understood the jackal's howl, got up from her bed and went to the river-side. Her husband, who was not asleep, followed behind her, but stayed at a distance because he did not want her to know that he was following her.

The woman then tugged the body to the shore, but she could not slip the ring off the dead man's finger, as his body was swollen, so she bit it off with her teeth, took the diamond ring and threw the body to the jackal.

The goldsmith was horrified to see his wife biting off the dead man's finger and was convinced that she was a witch. When they reached their house, he told his father what he had seen, and both the father and the son were convinced that she was indeed a witch. "Father!" said the young goldsmith, "I cannot live with a woman who is a witch, no matter how beautiful she may be! I shall take her to a far-off forest and leave her there, to live with the beasts".

The next day, the goldsmith called his wife and said: "Dear wife, today I shall take you to your father's house and leave you there, as you have not seen your mother and father for a long time and they must be anxious to see you".

The way to her father's house lay through a dense forest and as they passed through it, she heard a serpent hiss, "O, passer-by, how thankful I shall be, if you would catch the king-frog that croaks in a hole nearby and give it to me to swallow and you can take the treasures that are hidden deep beneath the hole where it lives".

The woman understood what the serpent hissed, so she caught the frog, threw it to the serpent and began to dig deep into the hole with a stick. To her surprise, she found a bagful of golden coins and precious jewels hidden

beneath the hole! She called out to her husband, gave him the bag of treasures and asked him to take the treasures back to his father's house, while she continued her journey to her father's house.

When the husband saw the bag of treasures, he could hardly believe his eyes, for being a goldsmith, he knew the value of the treasures. "How did you know where the treasures were hidden?" he asked. "Nobody knows, not even my mother and father, that I can understand the language of the birds and beasts. The snake that hissed, asked me to catch the king-frog, and give it to him to swallow and also said I could take the treasures that lay deep within the hole".

It was only then, that the goldsmith realised that he was blessed with a gifted wife, so he decided to take her back home with him, rather than leave her in the forest as he had planned to do.

As they reached the house, he said to his wife, "Good wife, enter the house by the back

door, while I go to my father's shop by the front door, and show him the treasures you have found".

But, to her sorrow, as she entered, the old goldsmith was at the door. Shocked to see her return without her husband and because he was certain that she was a witch, he thought she had killed and eaten his son! He immediately took out his hammer and hit her on the head and the innocent woman dropped dead to the ground.

At that moment, the son stepped in with the bag of treasures, but alas! it was too late. The son and his father wept in sorrow and lived to regret that the good woman who had given them priceless treasures, was killed for no fault of her own."

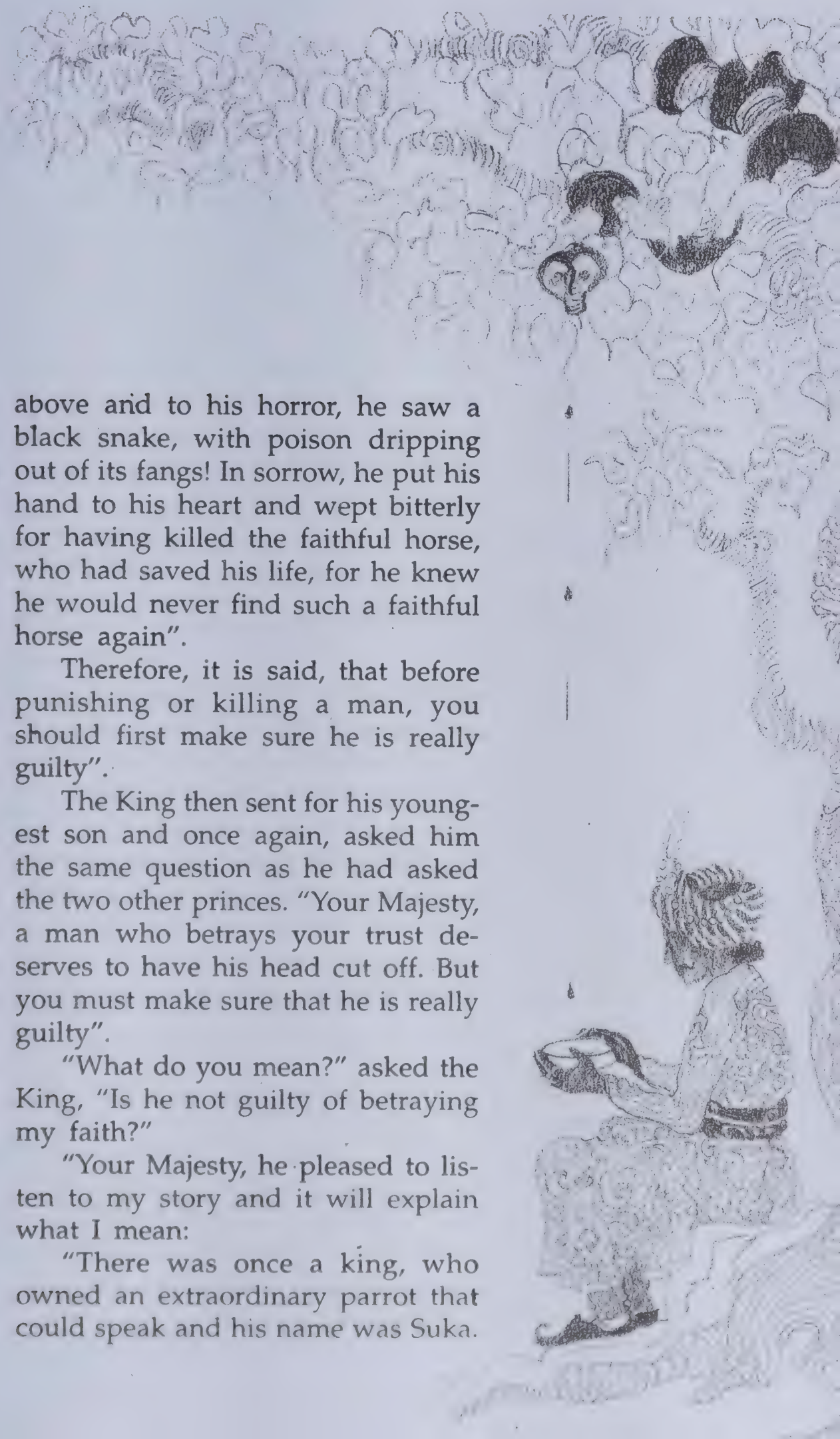
So, Your Majesty, before you punish or kill a man, first made sure that he is really guilty".

The King then sent for his second son and asked him the same question. "Doubtless, your Majesty, if a man to whom you have entrusted your honour and your life, betrays your trust, he deserves to have his head cut off. But, before your punish or kill him, you must make sure that he is really guilty" replied the prince.

"What do you mean?" asked the King, "Is he not guilty of betraying my faith?"

"Your Majesty! if you are pleased to listen, I will tell you a story which will explain what I mean:

"There was once a king, who loved hunting in the forest. One day, he rode out alone into a distant forest, but when he got there, he felt very thirsty. He searched all around for water, but could see neither lake nor pool, not even a stream of water. In despair, he sat beneath a tree and heard a drip, drip, drip from the tree above. Thinking it was rain drops dripping through the branches, he collected drop by drop in a cup, and was about to drink it, when his horse, who knew better, stood up on its hind legs and dropped the cup from his hands. The king, in fury, drew his sword and cut off the head of the faithful animal. But as he was about to leave, he heard a hiss from the tree



above and to his horror, he saw a black snake, with poison dripping out of its fangs! In sorrow, he put his hand to his heart and wept bitterly for having killed the faithful horse, who had saved his life, for he knew he would never find such a faithful horse again".

Therefore, it is said, that before punishing or killing a man, you should first make sure he is really guilty".

The King then sent for his youngest son and once again, asked him the same question as he had asked the two other princes. "Your Majesty, a man who betrays your trust deserves to have his head cut off. But you must make sure that he is really guilty".

"What do you mean?" asked the King, "Is he not guilty of betraying my faith?"

"Your Majesty, he pleased to listen to my story and it will explain what I mean:

"There was once a king, who owned an extraordinary parrot that could speak and his name was Suka.

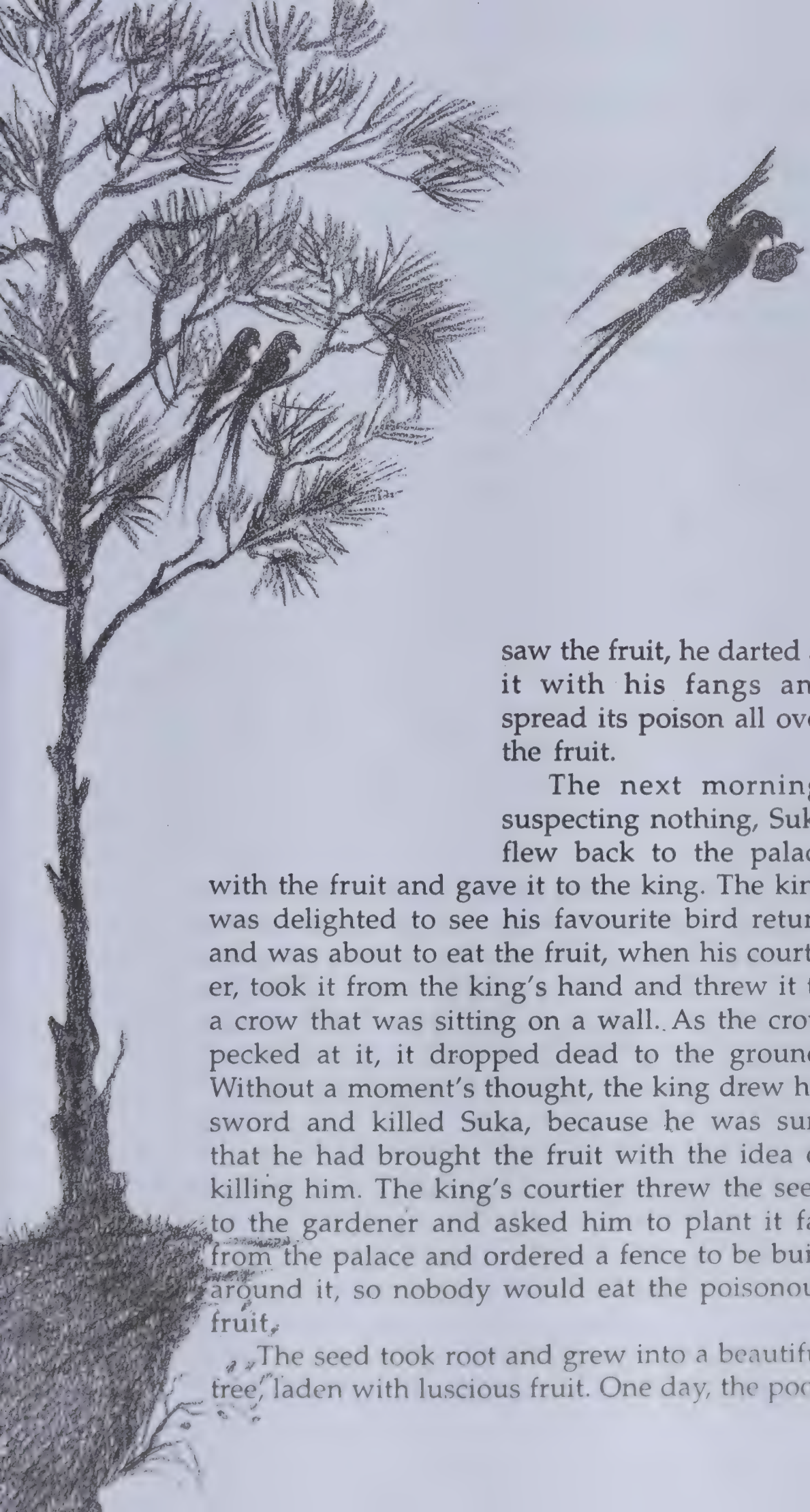
One day, Suka flew into the forest and there, he met his father and mother. As they had not met for a long time, his mother invited him to spend some time with them in their nest, on top of a tree, in a distant land. Suka was happy to go with them but he told them he could not go without taking the king's permission, but he would be ready to go with them the following morning.

Suka then flew back to the king and told him that he would like to spend a few days with his parents and the king reluctantly gave him leave, but only for ten days, as he loved Suka very much and could not bear the thought of having to live without him for long.

Early next morning, Suka flew with his mother and father to his parental nest and the three birds lived happily together, meeting friends and relations. But after a few days, Suka said "Dear Father and Mother, it has been wonderful to live with you in my parental nest, but now, I must leave you because the king has given me only ten days leave and today is the tenth day". Though Suka's parents were sorry to part with their child, they put their heads together and decided to send the king a gift.

They flew miles and miles through flowering orchards and fertile fields, and returned with a fruit from the Tree of Immortality. "Suka" said his mother, "Take this fruit back carefully and give it to the king. It is a fruit from the Tree of Immortality, and if the king eats it, he will never die!"

Early next morning, as the birds were singing the song of dawn, Suka left on his aerial journey, back to the king's palace. But the fruit was heavy and Suka was tired, so he took shelter for a night in the branches of a tree. But, he did not know where to keep the fruit because, if he held it in his beak, he was sure it would drop when he fell asleep. He searched through the tree and saw a hole in the trunk, where he hid the fruit. But, unknown to Suka, the hole was the home of a poisonous serpent! When the serpent



saw the fruit, he darted at it with his fangs and spread its poison all over the fruit.

The next morning, suspecting nothing, Suka flew back to the palace with the fruit and gave it to the king. The king was delighted to see his favourite bird return and was about to eat the fruit, when his courtier, took it from the king's hand and threw it to a crow that was sitting on a wall. As the crow pecked at it, it dropped dead to the ground. Without a moment's thought, the king drew his sword and killed Suka, because he was sure that he had brought the fruit with the idea of killing him. The king's courtier threw the seed to the gardener and asked him to plant it far from the palace and ordered a fence to be built around it, so nobody would eat the poisonous fruit.

The seed took root and grew into a beautiful tree, laden with luscious fruit. One day, the poor,

old gardener who was tired of his miserable life, decided to eat a fruit and die, because he had nothing to live for. That night, he ate the fruit and slept, hoping that he would never wake to see another day. But the next morning, to his surprise, he woke up feeling and looking like a vigorous, young man! His wrinkles had vanished and his grey hair had changed to black—blacker than a raven's feathers!

That same evening, the king walked into the garden and saw a handsome young man watering the plants. Bewildered, he asked him who he was and the young man replied, "Your Majesty, I am the same old gardener who has served you for many years. Tired of my life, I ate the forbidden fruit, wishing to end my life, but to my astonishment, I woke up feeling like a young and vigorous man!"

The king swooned with sorrow, for he had killed his beloved Suka for bringing him the gift he most desired—the gift of Immortal life!"

"Now, Your Majesty, I will confess what I have done. On my rounds at night, I saw a woman of divine beauty, coming out of the palace gate. I asked her who she was and she said she was Rajalakshmi, the Guardian Angel of the palace, and she was leaving because that night the king was to be killed. I begged her to stay and promised I would prevent the king from being killed, but she vanished. I immediately entered your chamber and saw a serpent circling around your bed. I killed the serpent, cut its body into a thousand pieces to make sure it was really dead, and left the pieces on a golden platter beside your bed. But, when I killed the snake, a drop of its blood fell onto the queen's hand and I wiped it off gently with my silken scarf. As I was leaving, the queen opened her eyes and saw me. Perhaps, Your Majesty thinks I have betrayed your faith, and if I have done wrong, kill me with your sword—but, let your sword be the Sword of Justice, for crime cannot become a virtue and falsehood can never turn to truth!"

The King, in gratitude, embraced his son and gave him his kingdom and his crown, and said, "I give you my kingdom and my crown, but remember, as the king of the City of the Sun, it should be your honour and your pride, to keep my kingdom and my people safe! And, when you use your sword, let it be the Sword of Justice!"

And now my story is done,
Red is the setting sun,
The silence of evening settles,
On flowers that close their petals.

Evening shadows are creeping,
Birds on their branches are sleeping.
Stars appear in the skies,
Like slowly-opening eyes.

The moon from her place of hiding
Over the night comes a-gliding.
Now that the night is deep,
Sleep, my little one, sleep.

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The culture of a region, the worldview and collective experiences of its people find various modes of transmission from one generation onto the next. The recounting of myths, legends and tales constitute a part of a glorious tradition. It could be a wandering minstrel, a professional storyteller or a fond grandparent keeping this tradition alive. The author has served an engrossing fare of folk-tales for the benefit of her readers. The wonder and mystery of life, the joy and struggle of existence, the interplay of fundamental emotions and the eternal relevance of age-old truths and values are all reflected in a magical landscape of a mountainous land which lines the northern boundary of the North East region of India.

Mayakshi Chattopadhyaya has been a regular contributor to magazines and newspapers on women's topics. She combines the use of both Urdu and English language with dexterity and ease. She has had a short stint with BBC, London as a children's story teller.

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